Lunch Break Confessions

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Lunch Break Confessions

by Anonymous

Summary

Gihun complains about the CEO during lunch to a coworker,

Without realizing said coworker is the CEO

For months to come

(Inspired by Overtime by creaphen) :)

Notes

Inspired by:https://archiveofourown.org/works/34054720/chapters/84710854
(pls go and read this amazing fanfic if you haven't already!)

Chapter 1

Gihun had promised himself he would turn his life around—overcoming his gambling addiction, finding a steady job, and rebuilding everything from the ground up for his wife and daughter. He took another drag of his cigarette, the lunch he'd brought forgotten on the roof floor, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

But all his efforts hadn't saved his marriage. His wife had fallen into bed with a junior she met at an office party, a man who, she claimed, had bigger plans for her. And just like that, after twenty years of marriage, it was all over. His daughter had also left for America with his wife, and not a single word had been spoken since. No phone call, no attempt to make amends. Gihun felt the weight of it all settling deeper, the silence more painful than any words could have been.

So now, he was stuck in a dead-end corporate job, alone. No family. No friends. They had all moved on, leaving him behind, like he was some forgotten relic of a life he no longer recognized. And the only place he had left to go was a lousy apartment that barely felt like home.

Damn his shitty life. Damn this fucking job. Damn his shitty boss-

"You shouldn't be smoking here—"

Gihun jolted out of his thoughts, whipping his head to the left toward the noise, nearly yelping when he saw the shorter man standing there—so close that Gihun could feel the faint warmth radiating off him. He was leaning over the same railing of the roof, staring at him with an expression that was somewhere between disapproval and curiosity.

The first thing Gihun noticed was the man's face. Despite the few lines that hinted at his age, the word *handsome* nearly slipped out of Gihun's mouth before he could catch himself. The guy looked almost out of place—too polished for a job like this. His hair was neatly combed, his eyebrows perfectly arched, and his nose, damn, it was almost too perfect. And that suit— *christ* —it looked like it cost more than his entire life savings!

Gihun couldn't help but feel the weight of his own crumpled appearance in comparison—worn-out shirt, sleeves rolled up too high, a faint scent of stale cigarettes clinging to him.

But fuck it—he wasn't going to let anyone disrupt the only time he felt at peace in this fucked-up world. He had fought so hard to carve out a moment of calm, and this stranger wasn't going to ruin it, no matter how polished or perfect he seemed

"So what? It's not like the asshole CEO is going to come up here and stop me." Gihun sighed, stretching his arms, the cigarette dangling loosely from his lips. As he stretched, he felt the fabric of his suit pull slightly—too tight on him, a size too small. It was the one his mother had bought him a few years ago to celebrate his job at the office, and he couldn't bring himself to throw it out, even if it barely fit anymore. He turned to the other man, throwing him a defiant look. However, the man didn't respond, his lips pressing into a thin line and his eyebrows raising slightly, his expression unreadable.

Gihun stared back, watching as the other man's eyes intensified, then drifted down to the cigarette dangling from his lips. A moment of realization slowly dawned on him.

Did he want one? Was he trying to figure out how to ask without looking desperate?

He mouthed at the cigarette in his mouth, mulling over the thought. Yeah, that seemed right. Why else would he be so defensive about him smoking up here? It’s not like he was the only one who did it.

Puffing up his confidence, Gihun straightened his back and looked the man right in the eye before asking, “Do you want one?”He held out the pack of cigarettes, the smoke still curling between them, waiting for the other man’s response.

The man only stared at the pack in Gihun's hand, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. His shoulders stiffened, and for a moment, Gihun thought about retracting his offer, feeling like he might have crossed a line.

"It's okay," Gihun added quickly, trying to ease the tension. "It's not like I’m going to tell on you."

As the silence stretched, Gihun awkwardly bumped the other's shoulder in hopes for a response, nervously laughing. "We can be like... secret smoking buddies or something? You don’t have to take one—uh, if I’m reading this right, that is..."

He trailed off, his words faltering as he realized how tense the whole situation had become.

However, after what felt like an eternity, the man didn’t take the cigarette from Gihun's carton. Instead, he reached forward, eyes never leaving his, and plucked the cigarette from his mouth. Gihun’s protests were ignored as the man brought it to his own lips and took a long, sinful inhale, the smoke curling in the air between them. The act made Gihun flush, his breath catching in his throat as his eyes widened.

For a moment, neither of them moved, the air thick with the shared smoke, and something unspoken hung between them.Gihun’s heart raced, and he felt a strange, unfamiliar tension in his chest.

To his surprise, as the man exhaled, the smoke drifting lazily into the cool air, a small, almost amused smile tugged at the corner of his lips, the cigarette still between his fingers. “So... ,please do tell me more about this asshole boss of yours.”

Gihun paused at the request, slipping the cigarette carton back into his pocket. His mind raced for a moment, unsure if he should even entertain the thought of talking about his boss to someone. Plus it was a strange question, considering everyone who worked here already knew about Inho's usual mannerisms and strict behavior. But something about the other man’s calm demeanor, the faint amusement in his voice, made him reconsider. Gihun exhaled sharply, deciding to go along with it.

“He’s a complete nut,” Gihun muttered, his gaze dropping to the busy street below, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. “Last year, he shortened lunch breaks just to cut a few hours off the workday, even though Jun Hee was pregnant and needed to eat properly. He fired Ali, even though it was his manager’s fault for screwing up in the first place. Fired Sae Byeok for being late, not even considering that she had to take her brother to school every day”

Growling , he gripped the railing tighter as his anger flared. “And don’t even get me started on what he did to Jung-bae. Fired him—one of the hardest workers in the whole group! He had a wife and a kid. All because of some ridiculous assessment he made everyone do, and then he turned around and fired half the people after that. All just to meet some damn quota or make himself look

good. It’s like we’re not even human to people like him—just tools to hit numbers. It’s like they are playing a game, but we’re the ones losing."

Rubbing his face, Gihun was almost taken aback by his own outburst. But as the words hung in the air, a strange relief washed over him. It felt good—almost cathartic—to finally let it out, even if just for a moment. Even if it was to a stranger, who now stood quietly, eyes fixed on him in thought. The cigarette lay stomped beneath his feet, a small puff of smoke still lingering in the air as he watched Gihun breathe in and out, processing the unexpected flood of emotion.

For a moment, Gihun braced himself, expecting the man to speak—maybe offer some unneeded pity or even throw a challenge his way. But he didn’t.

Instead, the man stepped forward, his gaze falling briefly to Gihun’s name tag before flicking back up, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“It almost sounds as if you’re not mad at him yourself, but rather for everyone else. How selfless,” he said, the words laced with a teasing, almost mocking undertone.

“I wouldn’t have cared as much if he hurt me,” Gihun huffed, leaning against the railing and closing his eyes. “But he hurt others more than I can count. I doubt your experiences with him was anything different.”

However, the other man didn’t reply immediately, just humming in acknowledgment. The sound was low and thoughtful, like he was processing Gihun's words. After a moment, he turned to him and smirked.

"I do hope you two make amends."

Gihun raised an eyebrow, taken aback by the remark. "You don’t know the half of it," he groaned, frustration and exhaustion creeping back in. "Make amends? Yeah, right. I don’t think I’ll ever have to see him face-to-face. He never bothers to come to the offices in person. He just sits behind a desk somewhere, barking orders and ruining people’s lives."

“I’m not so sure about that ” the smirk never left the other man’s face, only growing more prominent as Gihun stared back at him, confusion flickering in his eyes.

“You talk like you know something I don’t…”

The man simply shrugged, his expression softening as he leaned back against the railing. He carried himself with an effortless calm, as if the weight of the world barely touched him.

"Whatever," Gihun muttered, his gaze still fixed on the pavement below. His lunch break was almost over, so there was no point in lingering on it. But it did feel oddly nice to have someone to share the silence with, even if the company was a bit strange. At least he wasn’t talking to himself for once.

"By the way," Gihun added, glancing up. "I never caught your name..."

The man hesitated for a moment before responding. "Young-il," he said with a slight smile. "I do hope I see you again soon, Gihun."

Gihun nodded in response, the gesture brief but enough. He grabbed his uneaten lunch, cold and forgotten, and stuffed it back into his bag with a sigh. The thought of heading back down to the office and facing another mountain of paperwork was already weighing on his mind, the conversation with Young-il slowly fading as reality set back in.

Chapter 2

"Did you hear? We're getting an extra hour for lunch every day now! And the CEO even put up a notice about offering more time and accommodations for pregnant employees!"

Gihun's fingers paused mid-press, hovering over the "Enter" key. He turned abruptly to face Jun Hee, who looked as baffled as he was. She absently rubbed her growing stomach while handing him the notice, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Quickly, Gihun snatched the paper from Jun Hee's hand, scanning the words with urgency. He read it over several times, as if trying to convince himself that his brain wasn't playing tricks. But there it was, in black and white—the updated lunch hours with a full extra hour added to the daily break.

Dear All,

We are pleased to announce that Squid Enterprise has revised its policy regarding lunch breaks. Effective immediately, lunch hours will be extended to one and a half hours, up from the previously proposed half-hour limit. Employees requiring accommodations may request additional time as needed.

In addition, sanitary materials will be provided for those who are pregnant, and snacks will be available throughout the day.

We trust that these changes will be implemented across all offices promptly.

Signed,
Inho

Next to the CEO's flawless signature, the familiar blue circle stamp appeared, marking the document with the authority of every official memo that passed through the company.It stared back at Gihun as he gripped the paper, his fingers tightening so hard that the edges began to crumple under his grasp.

"What made him change his mind now?" Gihun's voice was laced with disbelief as he crossed his arms, staring at the memo like it might somehow reveal its true intentions. Junhee tilted her head, as if pondering the same question.

"Don't know. Maybe he's like the Grinch, his heart grew in size overnight or something," the younger girl said with a small, sarcastic laugh, rolling her eyes.

"But hey, I'm not complaining." Junhee pulled out a bag of Oreos from her pocket and waved it in Gihun's face, a wide grin spreading across her face. "Look, he even bought the good snacks. Not the off-brand ones. They even had Dalgona! I know what I'll be snacking on once lunch starts in a few minutes."

She tossed the bag to Gihun and waved her hands, already walking away with a noticeable skip in her step toward the office break room. "Try to eat something for once today instead of just smoking yourself to fullness," she called back with a teasing smile.

Gihun caught the bag in midair, his gaze fixed on it as his lips pressed into a tight line. Just because Inho made some changes, however necessary, didn't change the fact that he was still a terrible person. Sprinkling glitter on shit didn't turn it into gold—it was still just shit at the end of the day.

He almost laughed bitterly at his own thoughts, shaking his head as he stuffed the Oreo pack into his pocket. Grabbing his coat and lunch, he made his way toward the roof, the weight of his frustrations still heavy on his shoulders.

The fresh air would be a temporary relief, a chance to escape the stifling walls of the office, even if just for a few minutes.

However, what greeted Gihun on the roof wasn't the usual silence he'd come to expect. Instead, a familiar figure stood there, looking back at him with a slight curl at the corners of his lips. With the same immaculate combed hair and pristine suit, the man was casually leaning on the railings of the roof, as if he'd been waiting for Gihun to show up.

"Young Il…" Gihun muttered, stepping forward, his hand pausing around the cigarettes in his pocket. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on my lunch break too," the other man smiled, tilting his head slightly. "And when I find something interesting, I don't tend to let it go."

Interesting? Gihun blinked, his mind racing. Did he mean the roof? Or—? His eyes flicked quickly to the man, and before he could stop himself, a heat rushed to his face. He immediately looked down, feeling suddenly self-conscious. He doubted the man meant him. *Right?* But even considering the possibility left a strange, unsettling feeling swirling in his chest.

"Right…" Gihun breathed in, trying to shake off the odd tension in the air. He looked up again, frowning as his gaze shifted between the man and his noticeably empty hands. "But where's your lunch?"

At the question Young il almost looked startled before it vanished as quickly. "Ah. Lunch right."

Did the man forget his lunch? Gihun couldn't help but sputter, his gaze shifting between the expensive suit and the sheepish look on the man's face. Had he spent all his money trying to make an impression, neglecting his own needs in the process?He felt his heart pinch at the sight.

No this won't do.

Gihun shook his head and pushed the lunch bag into Young Il's hands, the man's surprise evident as he stared down at it.

"Eat. You shouldn't go hungry," Gihun insisted, his voice firmer now.

Young Il's gaze remained fixed on the lunch bag, his eyes widening as if he'd discovered something unexpected. The intensity of his stare made Gihun feel strangely exposed, as though the simple gesture had revealed more than he intended. He instinctively took a small step back, a wave of discomfort washing over him, as if he'd crossed an unspoken boundary.

“Uh—” Gihun cleared his throat, the awkward tension rising between them as the shorter man stared back, his expression unreadable. Something flickered in his eyes, and Gihun could feel his gaze pressing into him. “Take it as a thank you for listening to me a few days ago,” he added, his words coming out quickly to fill the silence. “And, uh, I don’t really eat lunch, so... you’re doing me a favor by eating it.”

At those words, Young Il’s face softened, and he held up the bag with a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Now that won’t do, will it?” he said, his tone light and casual. “Why don’t we share it instead?”

Gihun blinked, momentarily thrown off by the suggestion. He opened his mouth to protest, but the look in Young Il’s eyes—genuine, almost disarming—made him pause. There was a kindness there, an odd warmth that seemed to melt away his initial discomfort.

“Ok.”

The shorter man’s smile grew as he gestured for Gihun to sit, and before he knew it, Gihun found himself seated next to Young Il, their shoulders brushing as he started chattering away, caught up in the ease of the moment. The conversation flowed between them, with Gihun gesturing animatedly as he stuffed his face with a beef short rib. Without thinking, he picked up another piece and, almost instinctively, cupped his hand under the chopsticks, offering it to Young Il.

The man didn’t hesitate. He took the food without protest, his lips closing around it effortlessly. But it wasn’t the act of eating that caught Gihun’s attention—it was the way Young Il’s eyes stayed locked on his, unblinking, as though he were studying him intently.

Gihun’s breath hitched, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead, but he couldn’t seem to look away. He watched as Young Il’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment, savoring the taste, before his tongue darted out to catch the sauce that dripped from the food-

“The CEO decided to change the policy, and you’re upset about it because…?”

“Right, the CEO,” Gihun snapped out of his thoughts, his hand jerking back from Young Il’s face, almost as if realizing how close he was. He quickly set it aside, feeling a flush creep up. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad the changes were made, but I doubt he did it out of some sudden burst of compassion. It’s probably just to keep us quiet while he’s scheming his next move.”

“Maybe he just changed his mind,” Young Il shrugged, picking up one of the honey cookies Gihun had made the night before and taking a bite, savoring it.

“Yeah, right,” Gihun muttered, leaning his head against the railing, the cool breeze brushing against his face. “He’s like—what do you call it?—the frontman from that one show.”

Young Il raised an eyebrow, watching Gihun's animated gestures as he tried to recall the details of the show he’d clearly fallen asleep to last night.

“Yeah! The one where he pretended to be a player in the games to screw over the main character, all while secretly plotting to destroy everyone he thought was beneath him,” Gihun continued, his words tumbling out quickly. “The CEO is just like that, screwing over everyone while pretending he understands-”

COUGH

The sudden cough cut through Gihun's rambling, making him freeze mid-sentence as he stared at the man, who was now coughing into his hands, the cookie forgotten on the floor.

"Uh—are you alright?" Gihun's voice was laced with panic. His gaze darted around for something to help, and in a flurry of motion, he grabbed his water bottle. He quickly handed it over, holding it awkwardly with his tongue sticking out in concentration, careful not to spill a single drop on Young Il's pristine suit.He didn't have the savings to pay it back if something went wrong. He doubted selling his kidney would even cover it!

"Yeah—I—" The other man cleared his throat, waving the water bottle away, but Gihun didn't take his eyes off him, concern still evident on his face. "Just choked on something…"

Gihun hesitated for a moment, still not convinced. "Are you sure you're okay? You looked like you were about to pass out for a second," he said, his voice tight with worry. He shifted uncomfortably, still hovering a bit too close, unsure whether to pat the man's back or give him more space.

Young Il wheezed, his face was still slightly flushed from the coughing fit. "I'm fine, really," he reassured "Maybe you are right the CEO might have some hidden agenda I might not be considering."

At those words, Gihun jumped up, arms flapping in the air, his voice rising with excitement. "Right! No one would change their mind so fast, not even him!" He began pacing, clearly worked up again, and repeated his thought process once more. "There's no way he's doing this out of the goodness of his heart. It's all a game—a strategy. Make us feel comfortable, maybe even grateful, and then pull the rug out from under us when we least expect it!"

He stopped abruptly, turning to face Young Il, who was still sitting with a calm expression. This time, a slow chuckle escaped from his lips.

"You don't agree with me , don't you?" Gihun pouted, narrowing his eyes at the other man, who let out a soft snort of amusement.

Young Il just shrugged, a playful glint in his eyes. "I'm not saying anything. But it's hard to argue with logic, even if it's a little... cynical."

Gihun huffed, arms crossed. "Cynical, huh? Guess that's one way to put it." But despite the words, he couldn't suppress the small grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

"You really are an interesting one, Gihun," he said softly, his gaze on him. Then, with a smooth motion, Young Il stood up, brushing off his pants as he checked his watch. A brief flicker of something -*disappointment*? crossed his face.

"I have to go, but please, do tell me more about your conspiracies next time," he added, flashing a smile and Gihun froze, his thoughts lingering on the words *next time.*

"Wait, *next time* ?" Gihun blinked, confused. Was he really willing to spend time with him again after all the rants and complaints?

"As I said," Young Il began, walking toward the door before pausing, turning just slightly. "I don't intend to lose something so interesting."

With those words, he turned and disappeared down the stairs, his heels clicking against the floor with each step.

Gihun stayed where he was, his mind racing, only moving when the sound of Young Il's footsteps had completely faded.

God, he really needed a cigarette.

Chapter 3

The next time Gihun saw Young Il, it was surprisingly in the office. He walked in like he owned the place, hands casually tucked into his pockets, exuding an air of confidence that made the whole room feel like it had shifted. His presence was so commanding, so effortlessly composed, that even the buzz of office chatter seemed to dim when he entered.People who had been in mid-conversation fell silent, as if their words had been taken from them by the sheer gravity of his presence.

Gihun, however, was too preoccupied with his own issue to notice right away. He was already in the middle of a heated argument with the current manager, Junhee standing behind him, a silent but solid barrier. The tension in the air was thick, and Gihun could feel the weight of the manager's words like a punch.

“If she wants to do that disgusting shit, she should’ve done it at home,” the manager spat, his face contorting into a sneer as his eyes locked with Gihun’s. “It’s bad enough she’s not as productive as the rest of us, always needing bathroom breaks. Now she has to stall the whole office with her.”

His words hung in the air, venomous and dripping with disdain.

Gihun’s gaze hardened, his fist clenched at his side. His voice was low and controlled, but there was no mistaking the weight behind his words. “If you have a problem with it, you can take it up with HR. But don’t you dare bring anyone down because of your personal opinions.”

Behind him, Junhee tugged gently at his shirt, her fingers trembling slightly as she shook her head, biting her lip in concern. “It’s okay, Gihun,” she said softly, her voice tinged with a mixture of embarrassment and understanding. “I just had a bad case of morning sickness. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Her words hung in the air, the vulnerability in her tone making Gihun’s heart tighten.

The manager, clearly sensing the shift, scoffed dismissively, his sneer still lingering. “See, she even agrees. Why are you being so argumentative about it?”

His voice dripped with sarcasm, trying to paint Gihun as the troublemaker in the situation. Gihun’s patience was wearing thin.

But before the manager could get another word out, a voice interrupted, low and commanding, causing both Gihun and the manager to turn in unison.

“I don’t see anyone interrupting the workplace but you,” Young Il's voice cut through the tension, smooth and controlled, yet carrying a subtle sharpness that was impossible to ignore.

“Young Il...” Gihun muttered, his eyes quickly flicking between the imposing figure before him and the manager, whose face had suddenly drained of color. The manager flinched at every step Young Il took toward them, his eyes darting nervously as if searching for an escape.

For a moment, Gihun’s thoughts stalled, and he couldn’t quite wrap his head around why a top manager would be so intimidated by an ordinary worker. But then again…he looked back at Young Il. The other man's gaze was unwavering, focused entirely on the retreating manager. There was

something about the way he held himself—his presence was quiet, but undeniably intense, like a storm waiting to break. It shifted the entire atmosphere of the room.

If Gihun had been on the receiving end of that stare, he was pretty sure he'd be trembling in his shoes, too. Hell, he'd probably shit himself.

And he wasn't a coward to admit that.

"In-" The manager stammered, but his words faltered as Young Il's gaze hardened, the intensity in his eyes sending a chill through the room.

The air grew thick with tension, almost suffocating, as Young Il's voice cut through the silence with cold precision. "I doubt the CEO would appreciate what happened today. I'll be sending a report in. You'll need to head up to HR at the end of the day."

A brief flicker of confusion crossed the manager's face, but it quickly vanished, replaced by a tight, reluctant nod before he hurried out of the room, his footsteps echoing as he fled the scene.

Staring at the shorter man, Gihun froze, his brain struggling to process what had just unfolded. His thoughts were muddled, unable to make sense of the sudden shift in power dynamics. But before he could sort through the confusion, Junhee stepped forward, her face calm and composed as ever.

"Thank you," she said, her voice steady.

Gihun watched, still in a daze, as Junhee bowed deeply, gratitude evident in every movement. She then turned to him, her eyes twinkling mischievously. With a playful grin, she tiptoed up to him, leaning in close enough to whisper in his ear, her breath warm against his skin.

"I didn't know you got a sugar daddy."

The words hit Gihun like a cold bucket of water. For a moment, he couldn't even move, his mind going blank in disbelief.

"WHAT?" Gihun exclaimed, his eyes wide in shock. He slapped a hand over his mouth, immediately pulling Junhee aside and spinning them both around so they weren't facing Young Il anymore.

"He isn— I— no," Gihun stammered, his thoughts a tangled mess. His mouth worked but no coherent words came out as he struggled to make sense of the situation. "He's just a coworker."

Junhee, still grinning from ear to ear, raised an eyebrow, her playful expression clearly enjoying the reaction she'd just provoked.

"I swear," Gihun muttered under his breath, still flustered, "Stop teasing me about this... It's not like that."

"Yeah, right," Junhee scoffed, her eyes briefly flicking over to Young Il before returning to Gihun. "With that suit? He could buy out this whole company. I doubt he actually works here."

"Even if he *was* rich, how can you assume he's my sugar daddy?" Gihun grimaced at the thought, mentally apologizing to his mother for even entertaining the idea. "He defended *you* , not me."

Junhee rolled her eyes, looking at him as though he'd just missed the most obvious thing in the room. *Okay, maybe he was missing something here* , but he was pretty sure he was right this time.

"When he walked into the office, he wasn't even looking at anyone but *you* ," she said, her voice dripping with amusement. "I'm pretty sure he only stepped in because you were getting harassed."

Gihun blinked, caught off guard by the sudden clarity of her words.

"Yeah, well," Gihun muttered, shuffling his feet awkwardly. "That's just... coincidence. Besides, he's dead broke."

When Junhee shot him an unimpressed look, he quickly wilted under her gaze.

"I swear! When I was with him on the roof, he didn't even have lunch with him. He was starving himself just to leave a good impression."

Junhee's voice faltered as she processed his words, her eyes widening in disbelief. "With him on the roof…" She paused, then her expression turned a shade of realization, her voice rising in shock. "You guys did *not* ... during work?"

Gihun's eyes widened in panic, his hands waving frantically in front of him. "No! No, nothing like that!" He shook his head vigorously, feeling the heat rise in his cheeks. "We just... talked! Like I said, he's just a colleague!"

Junhee's grin widened, clearly entertained. "Sure, sure. Just a colleague. But... if he is just a coworker, then you've got *really* good taste in colleagues.'"

Gihun groaned, covering his face with his hands in embarrassment.

"What are you guys being so secretive about?"

Both of them froze, turning to the subject of their conversation. Gihun's heart skipped a beat as he found himself face-to-face with Young Il, whose smile was now entirely different—more relaxed, more knowing. It made something flutter uncomfortably in Gihun's chest, but he quickly squashed the feeling down.

He straightened up, attempting to appear casual, but it was hard to ignore the way his pulse quickened under the man's gaze. Junhee, however, didn't seem to share his discomfort. She nudged him lightly on the side, an eyebrow raised in teasing curiosity.

"Why did you come here?" Gihun asked, his voice more defensive than he intended. He quickly cleared his throat, eyes avoiding Young Il's as he tried to hide the awkward tension creeping up on him. "I thought you worked in a separate department."

"I went to the roof earlier," Young Il said, his eyes shifting between Junhee and Gihun with a look that was difficult to read. For some reason, Gihun couldn't shake the feeling that the other man wasn't exactly pleased. "But I couldn't find you."

He paused, briefly eyeing Junhee's stomach before returning to Gihun. "I wanted to ask you out for lunch,"

At those words, Gihun could already feel Junhee's grin stretching wider. He winced—his lunch break was almost over, and he didn't want to-

“He’d love to!” Junhee piped up before Gihun could respond, her voice cheerful as she answered for him. Gihun turned to her, stunned.

Young Il stiffened, his eyes narrowing slightly as he paused before asking, “And... are you Gihun’s wife?”

This time, it was Junhee’s turn to look as stunned as Gihun had been. Gihun would’ve teased her for the reaction if he didn’t feel like he might either laugh or cry at the absurdity of it all. Did Young Il really think he was some kind of lecher, preying on a girl who could practically be his daughter?

Junhee blinked, her expression still frozen in shock, before she managed to find her voice. “Wait, what?!” She stammered, eyes darting between Gihun and Young Il. “Did you seriously just—No! I’m not—He’s not—We’re just—”

“Coworkers! Coworkers!” Gihun blurted out, his voice slightly cracking as he tried to force the words out with more confidence than he felt. He squeezed his eyes shut, silently praying for the day to end, hoping the ground would just swallow him up and make him disappear.

Young Il blinked at Gihun's outburst, his posture relaxing as if nothing had happened. “Right. So, lunch?” He tilted his head casually, as though he hadn’t just given both of them a heart attack.

Gihun nodded quickly, eager to escape the current situation . He grabbed his coat and practically pulled Young Il away, grateful for the chance to put some distance between himself and the conversation.

But just as he was about to reach the door, a voice rang out from across the room.

“Behave yourself, Gihun!” It was followed by a burst of laughter that made Gihun freeze for a moment, his hand still on the door handle.

He glanced back to see Junhee giving him a thumbs up, laughter echoing behind her, and his face flushed as he hurried through the door, trying to ignore the warmth of Young Il’s hand on his back.

Chapter 4

Gihun’s eyes scanned the menu, a bead of sweat running down his face as he nervously looked up at Young Il. The latter's smile was calm, almost too calm, as he sat there with a glass of whisky in hand, his fingers gripping it firmly as if it were the only thing anchoring him in the moment.

Somehow, Young Il managed to convince him to spend the entire day together, assuring him that he’d handle anything that came up. And for reasons Gihun couldn’t quite explain, he believed him. But now... he couldn’t help but want to slap his past self for ever agreeing to it.

What the hell are these prices? Is this why he’s broke?

His eyes drifted to Young Il’s expensive watch, the tailored suit, and the coat carelessly draped over the chair. He couldn’t help but wonder if Young Il had always been living beyond his means, trying to keep up appearances while he couldn’t even afford bread for lunch.

“You really need to stop spending so much,” Gihun said, slamming the menu shut as he stood up. He placed a firm hand on Young Il’s shoulder, who looked startled, eyes darting from Gihun’s hand to his face. Gihun met his gaze with a determined look, his grip unwavering.”What will your poor mother think….”

Young Il's eyebrows furrowed, as if in confusion. His mouth opened slightly, then closed again, as if he was struggling to find the right words or simply unsure how to respond.

However, Gihun continued for him, his eyes gleaming. “It’s okay to admit that you have a shopping problem. Your Hyung will be paying for the meal today.” The moment those words left his mouth, he could almost feel his pockets bleeding, and a wave of regret hit him so hard he almost felt a tear welling up.

Yet all he could do was smile through it, pretending that paying for the round of indulgence was just another small price to pay to reassure the other man, no matter how much each word felt like a stab in the gut.

Despite his attempts to reassure the other, the look of confusion never left Young Il’s face.

“I can assure you I can pay for it, Gihun—but if you don’t feel comfortable—”

Gihun’s eyes widened. Was he too embarrassed to admit it? That he couldn’t afford the place and just wanted to impress him?

His heart fluttered at the pitiful sight. It was strange, seeing Young Il like this—vulnerable in a way he hadn’t expected.

It’s okay, he will be the bigger person for once.

“Yes, yes, uncomfortable! Uh, I usually don’t like places like these. Let’s just go to—” Gihun’s hands flapped in the air, like a chicken. his words stumbling over each other as he glanced around in a panic. His eyes darted to the window, trying to find some kind of escape, before he suddenly pointed at a bar across the street, the neon lights flickering brightly. "There! That place looks... better."

Young Il's eyes followed where Gihun was pointing, his gaze flickering with something unreadable before he turned back to the other man. His lips tightened into a line in quiet disbelief"Are you sure you want to go there?"

Gihun nodded vigorously, grabbing his coat and quickly heading for the door. He waved for Young Il to follow, not looking back. Young Il watched him for a beat, before standing up, shrugging into his own coat, and trailing behind. The sound of music grew louder as they neared the bar, its neon lights flickering like an invitation into the chaos inside.

“See? This is so much better!” Gihun shouted over the thumping music, shedding his coat and hanging it by the door before grabbing Young Il’s hand and pulling him toward the crowd. “I’m gonna grab us some drinks—”

His voice faltered as his eyes landed on two men near the door, casually kissing each other without a care in the world. The sight momentarily threw him off, his face flushing with heat as he quickly looked away. He turned to Young Il, who glanced at the couple for a brief moment before turning back to Gihun, his eyes half-lidded, unreadable.

A jolt of electricity shot through him at the intensity of Young Il's gaze. Without thinking, he yanked his hand away and stumbled backwards toward the drinks area, his face flushed with heat and beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Yeah, drinks—drinks, I’ll be right back!" Gihun blurted, his words rushing out in a frantic blur. Without waiting for a response, he spun around and made a mad dash toward the bar, his heart thumping loudly in his chest as if it might burst. The chaos of the music and the crowd faded into the background, but the pounding in his ears only grew louder.

“Two soju’s, please,” Gihun mumbled, his voice barely audible over the music as he tried to ignore the intense gaze burning into his back. He couldn’t explain why his body felt so off—his palms clammy, his breath shallow—but it had to be the bar, right? There probably wasn’t any air conditioning, that was all. Just a little heat, a little discomfort.

It’s not like he’d ever thought Young Il was attractive just moments before or wanted to *lean* into that thought—nope, nope, nope. It was just the trick of the light, and besides, Young Il was an attractive man—he couldn’t deny that. Yeah, just attractive. He could admit when a guy was good-looking, no problem. Nothing to worry about.

But as he grabbed the drinks and turned back toward Young Il-

“Hey, watch it!” A man with purple hair suddenly appeared, glaring as he clutched the sleeves of his now-soaked shirt, the unmistakable stench of soju wafting from him. His eyes narrowed in irritation as he shook his shirt, clearly annoyed by the spill.

“Uh—sorry…” Gihun stammered, his face flushing as he stared at the man in front of him. He quickly fumbled with the bundle of napkins in his hand, trying to wipe away the mess, but instead, it only seemed to make the other man angrier.

“What the hell, old man?!” The other man shoved Gihun, his glare seething as Gihun staggered back. “Do you have any idea how much this costs—?”

But before he could lunge forward to grab Gihun, a figure stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

“What’s going on here?” Young Il's voice was low and icy, his eyes sharp as steel as they bored into the other man. His hands twitched at his sides, a clear sign of restraint.

“Your boyfriend spilled his drink on my one-of-a-kind Thanos merch!” the other guy snarled, pointing at Gihun, who immediately braced himself, ready to throw out a string of apologies. He was even preparing to offer to cover the dry cleaning, anything to make this right.

But Young Il seemed to have other plans. His eyes roamed over the other man’s figure, pausing as if evaluating him, before he spoke with a calm, but unsettling intensity.

“Who?”

At those words, the purple-haired man’s eyes widened in shock, his expression faltering, as though he’d been slapped in the face.

“What do you mean who!”

And the next words that came out of the other man’s mouth almost made Gihun feel like he was trapped in a fever dream. A nightmare, more like it. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared him for what was about to be said.

The guy waved his hands around dramatically, the rings on his fingers glinting under the bright lights as if to make sure everyone noticed.

“In the sea of faces, I caught your eye,
My beauty, my flower, blooming among the weeds—”

He paused, as if lost in thought, searching for a rhyme to complete the absurd line, his expression serious as if this was the most profound thing he’d ever said.

“Lead?” Gihun piped up, unable to stop himself.

Young Il turned around to look at him, a smirk tugging at his lips before he turned back to the purple-haired man.

“Succeed?” he suggested coolly, his tone dripping with mockery.

The man— *Thanos* —eyes widened immediately, his mouth curling into a wide grin. “Hey, thanks—” he started, looking genuinely pleased, as if he’d just been handed a key to some cosmic puzzle.

But just as quickly as his smile had appeared, it vanished, replaced by a scowl even more menacing than before. “You ruined my flow, man,” he growled. “What are you two old fucks

doing here anyway? Doubt any girls would even look at you.”

Young Il froze at the words, his gaze sharpening as he stared at the other man, as if trying to process what he had just heard.

"What do you mean?" Young Il asked, his eyebrows raised. "This is a gay bar."

“What gay bar—” Thanos stilled, his eyes darting around at the sea of men chatting and drinking, the realization slowly dawning on him. At the same time, Gihun's eyes widened in shock. “I need to call Namgyu.”

As Thanos walked away, phone in hand, muttering profanities under his breath, Gihun stood frozen, his heart pounding in his chest. He had just… just *propositioned* his coworker without even realizing it.

Oh, shit.

Chapter 5

Gihun felt himself sway as he jumped up, Young Il stumbling beside him, letting out a loud, drunken cheer. The kid had managed to land all five dice on the back of his hand, triumph lighting up his face as if he had just conquered the world.

"See? I told you I could do it!" The kid grinned widely, holding out his hand, eyes shining with expectation. He was practically bouncing on his heels. Gihun almost froze, staring at the hand in confusion, his mind still muddled from the alcohol and the excitement of the game. What was this kid asking for again?

But the kid didn't relent, his gaze unwavering, eyes shining with anticipation as he flexed his hand, clearly not going to let this go. "You promised me 2000 won if I could do that."

The realization hit Gihun like a punch to the gut.

He had *definitely* forgotten about that little wager. He groaned inwardly, fishing for his wallet, wondering how he'd ended up in this situation.

"Here, you little brat," Gihun scoffed, reluctantly handing over the 2000 won, his fingers brushing the bills with an exaggerated sigh. The kid snatched it greedily, his eyes scanning the money quickly, making sure he wasn't being shortchanged. Gihun ruffled his hair, his expression a mix of mock annoyance and reluctant affection. "Don't spend it all at once,"

The kid grinned, shoving the cash into his pocket before quickly grabbing the spinning top and string. Without missing a beat, he thrust them toward Young Il, who accepted them without a word. Young Il hesitated for a moment, then began wrapping the string around the top with unsteady hands, his movements awkward but purposeful

Gihun's eyes followed the movement of Young Il's hand, a sudden wave of dizziness washing over him. He wasn't sure how much he'd drunk, but the night had blurred into a haze—laughter, lights, voices blending together in a dizzying rush. Everything felt a little unreal, like he was watching himself from the outside, struggling to stay grounded in the moment.

He blinked, the memories rushing back in fragments, like pieces of a dream—being pulled from one group to another around the bar, celebrating with strangers, each joking and teasing about whether he and Young Il were a couple. He'd deny it each time, laughing it off, but the awkwardness still lingered.

However, Young Il never answered for them—didn't confirm or deny the rumors, nor did he ever ask why Gihun had invited him there in the first place. And, truthfully, a part of him was relieved he didn't.

'You suck at this Mr…. "

Gihun glanced up just as Young Il somehow sent the top flying toward his back. He quickly scrambled to retrieve it, then tried once more, his focus sharpened as he spun the rope around the top with more precision than before.

But his next attempt still ended in failure, the top lying motionless on the ground as Young Il stared at it, rope still clutched in his left hand.

A small sigh escaped from his lips as he picked up the top, eyeing it as if it were his greatest enemy. He twirled it between his fingers, clearly deep in thought.

Whether it was the rush of adrenaline or the boldness that came with a bit too much to drink, Gihun grabbed Young Il's hand, his eyes filled with determination.

"You can do this, Young Il," he said, his voice steady despite the wild energy around them. "Just breathe, okay?"

Young Il glanced down at Gihun’s hand in his, momentarily caught off guard. But after a beat, he nodded slowly, his expression softening. With a small exhale, he wrapped the rope around the toy again, this time with a little more focus. Gihun, standing beside him, gave quiet words of encouragement, offering small nods and gentle smiles as Young Il tried again, his movements becoming more deliberate with each attempt.

Then—

With a sudden snap of the rope, Young Il sent the toy flying across the playground floor, both men watching with bated breath as it spun through the air. The top twirled gracefully, the rope trailing behind it, before finally landing with a satisfying thud, perfectly balanced.

For a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. Young Il stared at the top, eyes wide, as if not quite believing he had actually done it. Gihun, equally stunned, let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, a slow grin tugging at his lips.

Both men screamed, their voices echoing in excitement as they jumped up, cheering like kids. In a burst of pure joy, they hugged each other, laughing so loudly it almost drowned out the sound of the bustling playground around them.

“You guys are really weird,”

Young Il and Gihun froze mid-celebration, stilling in place as they turned to look at the kid. He was standing there, eyes wide and unblinking, clearly unimpressed by their over-the-top reaction. Gihun’s face flushed slightly, realizing how ridiculous they must have looked, while the shorter man raised an eyebrow, clearly trying to suppress a grin. The kid’s eyes narrowed as he sized them up, his gaze sharp and calculating. After a few seconds of silence, he raised his hands in the same position as before, flexing his fingers dramatically, as if to remind them of the deal.

“Still owe me 2000 won, though,” he said, voice full of smug satisfaction. “You said you could get it on the first try.”

This little-

Gihun's eyes twitched as he reached into his pockets, already feeling his wallet grow lighter. But before he could pull it out, he felt a hand stop him, gently resting on his wrist. He turned to find Young Il, who had an amused but almost knowing smile on his face.

"I was the one who failed ," Young Il said, his voice low but teasing, “I should be the one paying him”

Young Il grabbed the 2000 won from his own pocket, then paused for a moment, as if considering something. With a smile, he reached back in and pulled out another 1000 won, handing both bills to the kid with a casual, almost playful shrug. "Here. You won. Happy now?"

The kid's eyes widened at the sight of the extra cash, his expression shifting from smug satisfaction to wide-eyed surprise

Then he turned to face Gihun, waving the cash in his face with a mischievous grin. "I knew you were the cheap uncle as soon as I saw you," he teased, sticking out his tongue before strutting off, his pockets now noticeably heavier.As he walked away, Gihun could hear him humming smugly to himself, clearly pleased with the small victory.

"Why do I feel like we just got robbed?" Gihun grumbled, his voice laced with mock indignation. He stumbled over to the nearest bench and slumped down, feeling the weight of the night pressing down on him. His body ached, his head throbbed from the drinks, and his feet were sore from running around the playground, still tasting the faint bitterness of soju on his tongue.

He leaned back against the bench, his eyes fluttering shut for a moment as the cool night air brushed over him. The bench creaked as Young Il sat beside him, the sound grounding him back to reality.

Turning to look at Young Il, Gihun felt his own face soften at the sight of him.

"Thank you for today. I didn't have this much fun since Sangwoo-"

Sangwoo.

Gihun flinched, the name slipping out before he could catch it. It hung in the air for a moment, sharp and unwelcome.

"Sangwoo?" Young Il's voice was low, almost guarded, the name laced with a hint of something Gihun couldn't quite decipher. "Was he... your friend... lover?"

Gihun almost laughed at the suggestion, turning away with a slight shake of his head. "God, no. He didn't swing that way." He paused, biting his lip as a fleeting thought crossed his mind. "At least... I didn't think so."

He almost didn't want to continue speaking, but the words tumbled out of him, one after another, as if he couldn't stop them even if he tried.

"You know our current manager? He wasn't actually the first one. We had someone before him. "

Young il stayed silent as Gihun shifted around to make himself more comfortable, sitting straighter as he continued.

"It was Sangwoo," Gihun said quietly, his voice tinged with something like reverence. "He was a good guy, always pushing himself to the limit. The pride of Ssangmun-dong—graduated from SNU with top marks, the kind of person everyone looked up to."

A small, wistful smile appeared on Gihun's face as he remembered those days. "I was so proud of him when I first heard he got accepted here. I even made sure to join the same company he worked

for, thinking it'd be better if we stuck together, you know? So he could always have my back, and I could have his. I thought we'd always be in this together."

His words trailed off as he paused, almost as if the weight of the memory itself was too much to bear, and the silence that followed seemed to settle in the air between them. The connection he had once felt with Sangwoo now felt fragile.

"But he never let his ambitions stop him," Gihun continued, his voice growing heavy. He sighed, blinking away the weariness that seemed to cling to him. "He was the kind of guy who'd do whatever it took to climb higher. Even if it meant throwing someone else under the bus."

He looked down at his hands, clenching them into fists unconsciously. "He was the manager who let Ali take the fall for something he didn't do—all because he had a promotion lined up. He never hesitated, never thought twice about it."

"Funny thing was, Sae Byeok worked in the department right next to ours, and she was also in the running for the promotion," Gihun muttered, a bitter chuckle escaping his lips. His gaze was distant, as if the past was replaying in front of him"But guess who was the one who ratted her out for being late one day?"

Laying his head back against the bench, Gihun closed his eyes, letting the cool night air wash over him as his thoughts settled deeper. "Yet, I still can't blame him," he muttered quietly, his voice tinged with weariness. "How can I, when he's just trying to survive, like the rest of us?"

He paused, his jaw tightening. "But I can't help but direct my anger at the CEO. He knew about the situation with the employees—yet still acted mercilessly. Ignoring the manager's actions toward us? For what? Just to squeeze every last bit from us?"

Next to him, Young Il didn't say a word, but Gihun could feel his gaze on him, steady and unwavering. It was a quiet weight that pressed against his side, more comforting than oppressive. Despite the lack of words, Gihun knew the other man was listening—really listening.

Gihun wasn't sure how much time had passed as they sat there in silence, the air between them thick with unsaid words. Yet, in the stillness, he felt a strange sense of relief, as if, for just a moment, he could set the weight of everything aside.

Then, he felt a hand gently slip into his. The warmth of the touch settled him, and he let himself relax, grounding himself in that simple connection. As his eyes fluttered shut, the exhaustion he'd been fighting finally caught up with him. The soft hum of the night wrapped around him like a blanket, pulling him into a sense of peace. For once, he allowed himself to feel it, releasing the tension he'd been holding onto for so long, his body sinking into a quiet calm he hadn't even realized he was craving.

Chapter 6

Gihun stared at the pristine bathroom, his eyes briefly lingering on the expensive shampoo before shifting back to Jung Bae's bewildered expression

“So you're saying that you somehow got drunk, stumbled into a park, played children's games with your coworker, and ended up at his place?”

Gihun gripped his phone tighter, his hands trembling as he sat on the toilet, shifting uncomfortably.

“And then somehow ended up hiding in the bathroom—” Jung Bae paused, his eyes narrowing. “Wait, are those Louis Vuitton pajamas??”

However, Gihun didn’t respond. He simply closed his eyes, trying to ignore how comfortable the fabric felt against his skin and how the soft, luxurious material seemed to mold perfectly to him. Somehow, it was even the right size. He couldn’t bring himself to answer, a wave of embarrassment flooding over him as he tried to process how he'd ended up here—and wearing these pajamas.

He couldn’t remember exactly what had happened the night before, but one thing was certain—he was royally screwed. He just hoped it wasn’t in the physical sense, because the thought of what *else* he might’ve done had him breaking into a cold sweat.

“God, I wish I had a sugar daddy too,” Jung Bae bemoaned, sighing dramatically as he stared at Gihun. “You don’t know how lucky you are.”

Gihun snapped his eyes open, blinking in disbelief. “What—why does everyone keep saying that? And plus, you have a wife, Jung Bae! And a kid—” He paused, his voice trailing off as he watched Jung Bae casually shrug.

“Hey, a man can dream, you know?” Jung Bae replied with a grin. “I wouldn’t mind being pampered like a princess every day.”

Pampered like a princess? Fine. He was sitting on a toilet that was currently warming his butt, wearing clothes he never even dreamed of affording, and breathing air that felt a little too *luxurious* for his taste. But pampered? Like a princess? No way. He was a grown man, for God’s sake. Young Il had probably just done what any decent person would—made sure his drunk ass didn’t end up in traffic or worse and brought him home.

Just thinking about last night made Gihun want to slam his head against the expensive bathroom wall. What minimum wage office worker could even afford this?! His hands brushed against the wall before his fingers grazed the toilet paper, letting out a contented sigh. Wait, no—he couldn’t go off track. He needed to remember what had happened last night. If he’d acted like his usual drunk self, he was pretty sure the friendship with Young Il had already ended before it even had a chance to begin.

“Why are you even hiding in the bathroom, anyway?” Jung Bae’s voice cut through his thoughts, eyebrows raised. “This isn’t some high school party.”

He brushed off Jung Bae's question, his mind still racing in a panic. Maybe he could climb out the window and escape. But no, that wasn't an option—they were on the 30th floor. Maybe he could fake being sick and slip away. But then again, knowing Young Il, he'd probably haul him straight to the hospital. Maybe—

"You were always like this," Jung Bae snorted. "Speaking of high school parties, I remember when you met your first girlfriend. You hid in the bathroom, crying about how you didn't know how to get her bra off!" He mimicked Gihun's voice, dramatically sniffing. " *Jung Bae, help me please!* She looks so annoyed." Jung Bae chuckled, shaking his head. "And then you didn't even go back! We spent the whole party in the bathroom, *learning* how to do it."

He grinned, eyes twinkling with mischief. "Honestly, I thought you'd be better by now. But here you are, hiding in a bathroom again."

Gihun paused, staring at the man for a moment, then pointed an accusing finger at him. "This is all your fault! If you hadn't written that stellar recommendation for me, I wouldn't have ended up here in the first place!"

The other man sputtered, eyes widening in disbelief. "Excuse me! You were the one who begged me to do it, saying how you wanted to be a good hyung to your poor Sangwoo! You should be thanking me by now! I helped you land this *luxurious* life, Gihun!" He threw his hands up in mock frustration. "I'm basically your fairy godmother at this point!"

"Fairy godmother, my ass—" Gihun gripped his phone, bringing it closer to his face. But before he could continue squabbling with the other man, a knock on the door made them both fall silent. The sound echoed through the bathroom, heavy and deliberate.

Gihun's heart skipped a beat, his eyes darting to the door as he whispered, "Please don't be *him* ."

"Who else could it be dumbass ?" Jung Bae muttered, amusement in his tone. "It's his apartment!" He shot Gihun a look, smirking. "Guess your prince charming is here. I don't think I'll be of much help now." He gave Gihun a mocking salute. "Good luck, my friend. You're on your own for this one." Then, without a second thought, he ended the video call, leaving Gihun to stare at his shocked expression in the reflection of his phone.

"Are you alright in there, Gihun?" A low, husky voice echoed through the door, making Gihun freeze.

Heat rushed through him, and he stood up quickly. He definitely did not need to hear his coworker's morning voice. *Ever.*

Okay, calm down, Gihun. Maybe nothing happened last night. He glanced at the door in panic before clearing his throat, trying to sound casual, though his voice cracked slightly. "I'm... fine!" He scrambled to pull on his shirt, checking for any marks, anything that might indicate something had gone horribly wrong. But there was nothing. Just a perfectly normal, very expensive shirt.

He breathed a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived.The unease was still there, swirling in his chest. His mind kept racing, trying to piece together fragments of the night—laughing, drinking, playing stupid games... but then *nothing* . It was like a blank void in his memory.

Before he could spiral further, the voice came again, this time softer, almost concerned. "Gihun?"

His heart skipped a beat. That tone—too caring, too familiar. He cursed under his breath, panic flooding back. *Shit.* How was he supposed to face him now?

Slowly, he put down his shirt, his hands clammy as he stalked closer to the door. His breath caught in his throat, nerves twisting in his stomach. But then, he inhaled deeply, trying to steady himself. *You can do this, Gihun. Just open the door.*

With a shaky exhale, he slowly turned the handle, the sound of the click echoing in the silence. The door creaked open, revealing the man on the other side, standing just beyond the threshold.

The moment he saw the other, Gihun almost regretted it. Instead of the usual put-together image, Young Il's hair wasn't styled to perfection; instead, it framed his face casually, almost effortlessly. He was wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts, the kind of outfit that shouldn't have been so attractive, but somehow it made him look even more striking. His toned legs were on full display, and Gihun couldn't help but feel his heart race for reasons he wasn't quite ready to admit.

He stood there for a moment, frozen, trying to remind himself that he was *just* a coworker, but his body seemed to have other ideas.

"NOPE!" Gihun yelped, his face flushing red as he slammed the door shut in the other's face. The sound echoed in the hallway, and for a split second, he thought he might've heard a strangled *choke* on the other side.

"Come on, Gihun, I made you breakfast," Young Il's voice came through the door, soft and coaxing, as if he were trying to lure a cat out of hiding.

Gihun's stomach betrayed him with a quiet growl, and he cursed under his breath. *Wait... made him breakfast?* He could cook, was ridiculously attractive, *and* kind? What kind of person was Young Il? It was almost unfair how perfectly put-together he was.

Gihun ran a hand through his hair, pacing nervously. *This is bad. Really bad.* He didn't know whether to be flattered, terrified, or both.

There was a pause, then after a few moments of silence, Young Il spoke up again, this time his voice was small and pitiful.

"Did I do something wrong, Gihun?"

Gihun's heart twisted at the sound of Young Il's voice, his breath catching in his throat. Before he knew it, he had slammed the door open, ready to apologize, to fix whatever mess he'd created.

But he stilled as soon as he saw Young Il—standing there with a smirk on his face.

"Ah there you are, " Young Il teased, raising an eyebrow. His tone was light, almost playful, as if the pitiful voice moments ago had been nothing more than an act.

He crossed his arms, leaning casually against the doorframe, his smirk widening. " I made some hangover soup."

Yeah, soup. It sounded nice. Gihun trudged toward the dining area, feet dragging as he fought the awkwardness crawling up his neck. He almost felt embarrassed by how quickly he'd folded when

Young Il had used that voice on him. It was like all his defenses crumbled with one simple tone, and now here he was, walking to the dining table like a dog that had just been called for dinner.

Young Il pulled out a seat, his gaze lingering on Gihun as if silently urging him to sit.

“Go ahead,” Young Il said, his voice still that mix of teasing and gentle coaxing. “I didn’t make you breakfast for you to stand around looking all awkward.” His eyes glinted with amusement, but there was also something soft in his expression that made Gihun want to…

…want to…

For the first time in a long time, he didn’t know what.

Chapter 7

The streetlight turned green as Young il accelerated, while Gihun held his work bag tightly against his chest.

He had suggested taking the bus to the office, not wanting to inconvenience Young Il any further, but the other man had simply shaken his head, brushing aside Gihun's hesitation with a dismissive wave. Gihun had attempted to protest, but a single glance from Young Il had silenced him, making him swallow his words.

And here he was—sitting in an overpriced car, wearing an absurdly expensive suit his coworker had practically insisted he have, and a ridiculously extravagant cake on his lap. The moment the taller man's eyes had landed on it, Young Il had immediately purchased it, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

At first, when they had walked to the parking lot, Gihun found himself staring at Young Il's car, mouth agape. The sleek, polished vehicle gleamed under the fluorescent lights, a stark contrast to the modest cars Gihun was used to. He wasn't sure why he was so surprised—it wasn't as if he didn't know how much Young Il liked to spend—but the sheer luxury of it still caught him off guard. The smooth curves of the body, the gleaming rims—it looked almost out of place, as though it belonged in a showroom rather than a parking lot.

Gihun felt a bit ridiculous standing there, trying to mask his surprise, but his gaze kept flicking back to the car before he slipped into the seat without a word. The moment he settled into the plush leather, a wave of discomfort washed over him. It was a stark contrast to the cramped, utilitarian spaces he was used to.

Now, sitting in that same car, Gihun felt even more out of place than before, his discomfort deepening as he listened to the way Young Il tapped his fingers to the soft melody on the radio, filling the silence between them.

His eyes flitted between the car window and the other man, who glanced back at him with a soft smile. It was a smile that seemed effortless, warm, yet it only made Gihun feel more self-conscious. He caught himself shifting uncomfortably in his seat again, his fingers instinctively adjusting the grip on his work bag.

Through the awkwardness, desperate to say anything— *anything* at all—Gihun found himself blurting out the first thing that came to mind. "So, uh… I'd been meaning to ask… how did you know my size?"

The words rushed out before he could stop them, his cheeks flushing the moment they did.

Young Il's fingers stilled at the question, his eyes flicking briefly to Gihun before returning to the road. The air in the car seemed to shift, just a fraction, and for a moment, Gihun worried he might have said something wrong.

But Young Il didn't seem upset. Instead, he let out a soft sigh, the corner of his mouth curving up into a slight smile. "I noticed when we first met," he said, his tone still light, but with a hint of something more thoughtful behind it. "You were... a little too stiff in that old jacket. Had a feeling you'd need something more comfortable."

Gihun felt his chest tighten, though he couldn't tell if it was from the topic at hand or the fact that Young Il had been paying so much attention to him. "I, uh… I know it looks a little odd on me," he mumbled, his fingers nervously fidgeting with the hem of his sleeve. "My mother bought it for me before she passed. Said it was a celebratory gift." He paused, the words feeling heavier than he'd intended.

The moment the words left his mouth, Gihun regretted them. He hadn't meant to bring up his mother, hadn't meant to let the sadness creep in. His stomach churned, and he quickly turned his gaze back to the window, hoping the silence would swallow the uncomfortable weight of what he'd just said.

There was a pause, and Young Il didn't respond right away, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. The soft hum of the car seemed to stretch between them, filling the space with an awkward, fragile silence. Gihun waited, unsure whether he had said too much, but before he could gather his thoughts, Young Il finally swallowed and said, "I'm so sorry."

Gihun shook his head quickly, his voice quiet but firm. "It's… it's okay. You don't need to apologize." He glanced at Young Il, unsure of how to explain. "It's just how things are. She's been gone a long time now."

A genuine flash of sadness flickered across Young Il's face as he turned to Gihun. His usual calm demeanor softened for a moment, replaced by something far more vulnerable. "My wife also died a few years ago," he said quietly, his voice low, almost tentative. "I…"

He trailed off for a second, his eyes straight on the road but not fully focusing on it. Gihun could feel the weight of the unspoken words hanging between them, and for the first time, the air in the car felt less heavy with discomfort and more heavy with understanding.

Biting his lip, he tried to respond, but his throat tightened, and in the end, no words left his mouth. As Young Il pulled into the company's parking lot, the familiar hum of the car filling the quiet, his usual smile returned to his face, a calm mask settling back into place.

Without missing a beat, he turned to Gihun, offering a hand with that easy grin of his. Gihun reached out, his fingers brushing against Young Il's, but in the next instant, his foot caught awkwardly on the edge of the seat. In a split second, his balance faltered, and before he could stop himself, he tripped forward, arms flailing.

The unexpected collision sent them both off balance. With a sharp exhale, Young Il found himself leaning into Gihun, the sudden shift of weight too much for either of them to handle. In the blink of an eye, they were tumbling out of the car in an uncoordinated mess, their limbs tangled as they fell toward the ground with an audible *oof* .

But before Gihun could scramble off the man and stammer out an apology, a voice rang out, laced with amusement. "A little early for that, isn't it, Gihun?"

Gihun froze mid-movement, his face flushing an even deeper shade of red as he looked up to see Junhee standing nearby, cradling her stomach. Behind her was her ex-boyfriend, Myung-Gi, standing a few paces back, his eyes flickering from the two men to Junhee before settling on Young Il. For a moment, there was a stillness in the air as his gaze lingered on Young Il, his eyes widening with something that looked like recognition,

“Junhee—that’s… that’s—” the ex-boyfriend stammered, his words faltering as if he was trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

A beat of silence stretched out before he finally muttered under his breath, his voice barely a whisper. “Oh. shit.”

But when Myung Gi tried to open his mouth to say more, Young Il slowly shifted himself up, pulling Gihun with him carefully. Without a word, he reached out and grabbed Myung Gi by the wrist, tugging him to the side with a firm, steady grip. Myung Gi sputtered out in protest, his words stumbling over each other in confusion and frustration.

"Hey, what are you—?" Myung Gi began, but his voice trailed off as Young Il pulled him further away from Gihun, cutting off whatever he was about to say.

“You both go on ahead,”Young Il spoke with a familiar smile, his tone light but carrying an undeniable sense of finality as he opened the car door and handed Gihun the box of cake and his bag.“I need to talk to Myung Gi for a moment.”

Slowly nodding, Gihun took the items and followed Junhee toward the office doors. Their footsteps echoed softly against the polished floor, but Gihun couldn’t help glancing back over his shoulder every so often. His eyes flicked between Young Il and Myung Gi, who were still speaking in low voices by the entrance, a quiet tension hanging in the air between them.

Junhee glanced back too, her expression unreadable for a moment, before her lips curled into a sly grin. “So, you didn’t come back from work yesterday…” she said, her voice laced with mischief. “And then you show up to work together today? What were you two up to?”

Then she tugged at his tie, her grin widening even more. “Oh, is that the brand Young Il usually wears?” she teased, raising her eyebrows suggestively. Gihun yanked the tie back, his face burning with embarrassment.

“And is that a limp?” Junhee gasped dramatically as they walked through the doors, her eyes widening with exaggerated concern. She poked Gihun in the chest, then playfully jabbed a finger toward his face. “Man, I thought for someone your age…”

Gihun gasped, his eyes widening in shock. “What—no! You literally saw me trip just a few seconds ago!” He quickly straightened up, trying to brush off his embarrassment, but the teasing grin on Junhee’s face only deepened.

“Oh, so it’s just a *fall* now?” she teased, her tone light but full of mischief. “I thought maybe you were just *working* out some kinks... you know, from all that *late-night* office work.”

Gihun opened his mouth to protest, but the words caught in his throat as his face flushed even redder—though this time, there was an uneasy guilt beneath it. He tried to swat her hand away, but Junhee nimbly dodged, clearly relishing every moment of his discomfort.

Chapter 8

The seat at the manager's table sat glaringly empty, an absence that felt almost deliberate.

Gihun took his time with his cake, chewing slowly, while Junhee did the same, her gaze fixed on that vacant spot. After a moment, their eyes met, both eyebrows raised in silent surprise.

“I thought nothing would top what awaited me in the parking lot... But this…” Junhee paused, poking at her cake with her fork, her cheeks puffing up as she took another bite. She swallowed before adding, “I’m shocked the CEO actually decided to fire him.”

Gihun stared at her for a beat, biting down on his fork as he processed the weight of her words. Shock... was an understatement. He’d been with this company longer than he cared to admit, and he couldn’t remember the last time a supervisor had been fired in this department—especially one who had been there as long as he had.

Whenever complaints were raised, they were quickly dismissed. Supervisors had grown increasingly complacent, knowing that no matter how they mistreated the staff, it would be met with nothing but silence. It had become the unspoken norm—no matter how bad things got, nothing ever changed. And yet, now, they were faced with an empty seat, once occupied by someone they thought was untouchable.

“Well, you sure do have good timing. This definitely calls for cake and celebration.” Junhee held up her plate, a smile tugging at her lips. “It’s like you manifested it into being or something.”

Gihun gave a half-smile, but the unease still lingered, gnawing at him. It didn’t really matter in the end; they’d probably just replace him with someone just as incompetent—or worse, given how the CEO had a knack for recruiting assholes for said positions. He had bigger things to worry about, far more pressing issues than the firing of a supervisor.

He glanced at the clock, feeling the familiar knot of nerves begin to tighten in his stomach. No matter how many presentations he’d given over the years, he had never quite gotten over that anxiety—the way it crept up on him, no matter how prepared he was.

“I have to go.” Gihun gave one last look at the empty table before putting down his plate and grabbing his bag. “The rest of the cake is on my desk,try and eat a little more.”

Before heading to the upstairs meeting room, he ruffled Junhee’s hair. She grinned in return, her eyes already locked on the box on his desk.

"Good luck," she muttered, her voice muffled by the fork she kept in her mouth, eyes fixed on the cake. She gave a playful salute. “I will make sure to heed your orders and finish it all."

Gihun sputtered, caught off guard by the familiar salute, almost seeing a strange resemblance to Jung Bae in the twinkle in her eyes and the straight posture she struck. It was as if she’d suddenly transformed into a mini version of their overconfident friend, all energy and mischief.

He shook his head as Junhee waved goodbye, humming contentedly as she sliced another piece of cake for herself. As he stepped into the elevator and began the ride to the top floor, his grip on his bag tightened, his head lowering instinctively. He muttered under his breath, mentally running

through the details of his presentation, trying to commit every point to memory.But the more he focused, the more his thoughts kept drifting to pointless distractions—dinner plans, a random conversation from earlier, the cake sitting contentedly in his stomach. Anything but the presentation he was supposed to be preparing for.

By the time he reached the room, he was pretty sure he had forgotten everything he was supposed to say. To his surprise, Room 001 was empty, and he was the first one there. Normally, the vice president would already be waiting, his sharp eyes narrowing whenever Gihun burst in a few seconds late. The man would scrutinize him, eyes scanning his disheveled appearance with a judgmental gaze, as if questioning how someone like Gihun had even managed to slip through the system and get hired in the first place.

Well, today was full of firsts, wasn't it? Gihun thought to himself, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He hadn't expected to be the first one in the room, and he certainly hadn't expected the strange quiet that seemed to hang in the air. Still, he welcomed it—even if it was just a few minutes to collect his thoughts and review his notes.

He set his bag down on the table and pulled out the crumpled pages, scanning through the key points one last time. Tapping his pen on the paper absently, as if the rhythmic motion might somehow help him focus, he tried to settle his racing thoughts. But the words just blurred together, a jumbled mess in his mind. Every line seemed to slip through his grasp, and he fought the overwhelming urge to shove the papers back into his bag and walk out, to avoid facing whatever was coming.

Sighing, he slammed the end of his pen down on the paper, harder than usual, cursing under his breath as it slipped from his fingers and clattered onto the floor.

He watched it for a moment, the annoying click of the pen echoing in the silence. With a frustrated groan, he bent down, his ass sticking in the air as he groped under the table for the pen.

“What are you doing?”

A familiar voice called out, and Gihun jolted upright, his head slamming into the table with a dull thud.

"Shit!" he muttered, rubbing his forehead as he winced from the impact. His eyes darted to the source of the voice, only to find—not the vice president—but Young Il standing in the doorway, his jaw tense and teeth gritting.

“You, uh—” Gihun stood up, straightening his clothes, then stilled, staring at Young Il, whose expression remained rigid and tight. The tension in the room was thick, but Gihun couldn't help himself. “You look kinda constipated.”

Behind Young Il,No-Eul, the vice president's secretary, choked at Gihun's words, her face morphing into one of disbelief. The stoic mask she usually wore cracked for just a moment, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Are you serious—? What do you even see in—” She snapped her mouth shut mid-sentence, as if she had let something slip that she wasn't supposed to. Her eyes widened for a moment, and she quickly regained her composure, but the brief lapse in her usual stoic expression didn't go unnoticed.

Gihun looked between the two, pausing as if trying to make sense of the shift in the room. Finally, he awkwardly asked, "Where's the vice president?"

No Eul didn't miss a beat, her expression as calm as ever as she replied, "Unavailable at the moment."

"Then the CEO?"

Gihun asked, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he immediately felt foolish. The CEO never entertained these meetings—probably feeling far too high and mighty to deal with lower-ranking employees. It was the vice president's job to handle the day-to-day, the briefings, the presentations. But if the vice president was unavailable, they still needed one of them to oversee the presentation.

"Wait… then who—wait, why is Young Il here?" Gihun's voice trailed off, his confusion evident. This wasn't supposed to be a tag-team presentation.

At those words, No Eul eyed Young Il, her lips thinning slightly, before he turned to her, the two of them sharing a brief, unspoken exchange. It lasted only a moment, but it was enough to make Gihun feel like he was missing something important.

No Eul cleared her throat, then turned back to face him, her expression a little more tense than before. "The vice president has specifically asked... In- *Young Il* to supervise the meeting for him today," she said, her voice smooth, but there was a subtle edge to her words. She quickly added, "Of course, I'll be right here if something comes up."

Gihun looked at the others in disbelief, the thought almost too absurd to process. Were the higher-ups becoming so out of touch that they were asking their employees to do their jobs for them?

"What about the director?" he blurted out, his voice carrying a hint of frustration.

No Eul made an X sign with her arms, the gesture sharp and final. "Unavailable."

"Managers?"

"Unavailable."

A weak feeling of dread settled in his stomach. He hesitated, then asked, almost quietly,

"Team leaders?"

This time, No Eul didn't say anything. She simply shook her head, her arms still crossed in that X position, as if the answer had already been given.

Gihun's eyes widened, his mouth falling slightly open. How were they even running this company like this? Was today some kind of unannounced "Give the Higher-Ups a Day Off" day that he didn't know about? He stared at No Eul and Young Il, trying to make sense of the situation.It felt like an absurd joke—

"So, you'll have to make do with Young Il for now," No Eul said, her eyes narrowing into a hard line. The unspoken message was clear: get on with it.

He swallowed, the weight of the situation tightening in his chest. It was clear No Eul wasn't going to offer any further explanations. With a reluctant nod, he straightened his posture and turned his

attention to Young Il, who remained unnervingly silent.

A deep sigh escaped him as he rubbed his eyes in frustration, then plugged his computer in to begin the presentation.

And if he felt a pair of heated eyes on his lower back throughout his stutters, he didn’t find the energy to acknowledge it.

Chapter 9

His luck had been soaring lately, and his mood was at an all-time high as he reflected on the week's highlights. Not only had the vice president given him compliments on his presentation (though it looked like he had to force the words out through gritted teeth), but Junhee had asked him to be the godfather of her child. To top it off, Young Il had been visiting him more often, bringing treats that Gihun exchanged for the lunches he'd prepared for him in advance.

But he should have known better than to think it would *last.*

He groaned as he felt a trickle of blood from his head wound, his head spinning. He slowly lifted himself from the steering wheel, his hands gripping it for support as he stared blankly ahead. The officer was opening his door, shouting something he couldn't quite make out. His vision blurred, the world tilting as he tried to focus on the officer's face, but it all seemed to melt into a haze of flashing lights and muffled voices.

His body ached, the adrenaline from the crash still coursing through him, making everything feel surreal. The pain in his head was sharp, a constant throb, but it barely registered. He knew he needed to react, to do something, but his limbs felt heavy, sluggish, like they weren't entirely his own.

"Are you okay?" The officer scrambled to help Gihun up, his voice cutting through the fog, though the words sounded distant and distorted. Gihun's eyes flickered toward the officer's name tag, trying to make sense of it. It read "Juno?" No, maybe "Junh?" Or... "Jun-ho?"

The other man quickly assessed him, his gaze landing on the wound on Gihun's head. After a brief pause, he let out a sigh of relief. "It seems like it's just a cut and some bruises," he said, though his tone remained tense. "But I need to get you to a hospital."

Gihun quickly shook his head, the motion clearing his thoughts just enough. "I can't do that," he murmured,his voice hoarse but steady.

"What do you mean you can't…" The officer paused, his gaze shifting from Gihun to the scene around them. He grimaced at the sight of his totaled police car, now jammed into Gihun's battered, cheap vehicle. "I know it's probably uncomfortable going to the hospital with the guy who wrecked your car, but I really need to make sure you're okay."

His eyes were pleading, but Gihun waved it away, gripping the officer's shoulder with his own desperate look. "I can't. You don't understand. My stupid, horrible jackass boss will fire me if I don't show up—or if I'm even a few seconds late…"

Looking up at the officer, his face was tense, as if the reality of his priorities was crashing down all at once. But the other man's gaze only softened, and for a moment, Gihun thought he might get through to him.

"I get it," the officer muttered, running a hand through his hair. "But you still need to get checked out. You're in no condition to go to work right now."

Gihun shook his head stubbornly, his grip tightening on the officer's shoulder. "Please. Just let me go. I'll be fine, I just need a minute... I can handle it."

The officer paused, studying Gihun’s stubborn, unwavering expression. Then he finally let out a resigned sigh, as if realizing he wasn’t going to change the man’s mind. “Fine,” he said, his voice softening. He pulled out a notepad and scribbled something on it before handing it to Gihun. “If something comes up, make sure to call this number. But please—show up at the station later today so we can sort this out properly.”

Gihun said nothing. With a swift motion, he stuffed the piece of paper into his pocket, his actions sharp and deliberate. He took a quick step back, collecting his belongings from the wrecked car, his mind already leaping ahead to the office, the looming presentation, and the avalanche of consequences waiting if he didn’t show up on time.

Without a second glance at the officer, Gihun turned and sprinted toward the bus stop, his feet pounding against the pavement, pushing him to move faster. He couldn’t afford to wait—he had no intention of giving the officer a chance to reconsider.

By the time Gihun reached the office, he had already brushed off the concerned glance from the bus driver when he dropped him off. Wiping the blood from his forehead, he stepped into the elevator, offering a half-smile to the coworkers who eyed his head with quiet concern. He didn’t feel the need to explain—everyone just let it go, and he was content to leave it at that.

That was until he reached his floor.

Young Il looked up from a conversation with a coworker, his lips curling into a grin as he spotted Gihun. The change was immediate—gone was the stoic, distant expression from earlier, replaced by a more familiar, playful demeanor. But as Gihun drew closer, Young Il's grin faltered, his gaze narrowing as it landed on the cut on Gihun’s forehead.

Slowly, Young Il lifted his right hand to cup Gihun’s face, his fingers gently squeezing as he turned the taller man’s head from side to side, inspecting the wound with a mixture of concern and disbelief. “What the hell happened to you?” he muttered, his voice low but sharp, as if he couldn’t decide whether to be angry or worried.

Gihun winced slightly, feeling the touch on his bruised skin, but he shrugged it off.”It’s nothing," he said, trying to play it down, though his words didn’t quite match the look in his eyes.

Young Il's lips thinned into a tight line, his hands never leaving Gihun’s face as he studied him.

“Fine, okay!” Gihun snapped, his tone defensive as he pulled back slightly. “Just got into a little accident. Nothing to worry about.”

However, the shorter man didn’t look convinced. He held Gihun’s gaze for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, with a sigh, he finally released his grip on Gihun’s face, his hands falling to his sides.

“Go home, Gihun”

“Can’t,” Gihun muttered, his voice low, almost embarrassed. “Have to work.”

He shifted uncomfortably under Young Il’s gaze, not quite meeting his eyes, as if trying to avoid the weight of the other man's concern.

Young Il blinked, as if surprised by Gihun’s insistence, before his expression softened. Without another word, he reached out and grabbed Gihun’s hand firmly.

“Don’t worry about work today,” he said, his voice steady but reassuring. “I’ll handle it.”

There was no room for argument in his tone, and Gihun felt a brief flicker of relief, though a lingering guilt gnawed at him.

Yet, for some reason, something in Young Il’s steady gaze and calm authority made Gihun feel like, just for today, it was okay to let go.With a slow, reluctant nod, he finally gave in.

“Alright…” Gihun muttered, his shoulders sagging slightly as he let the tension go.

Young Il’s firm grip on his hand lingered for a moment longer, the warmth from his touch almost making Gihun's heart *pound*. But then, with a soft exhale, Young Il released him, stepping back just enough to meet his gaze.

“"Wait here," Young Il said firmly, his eyes locking onto Gihun's with a quiet intensity. Without another word, he turned on his heel, his gaze sharp and focused as he walked away, phone already in hand.

Gihun watched him go, then glanced at the coworker who had been standing nearby. The other man was staring at them both, mouth agape, eyes wide with surprise. It was as if he couldn’t quite comprehend what he had just witnessed.

His gaze lingered for a moment longer, the silence thick between him and the staring coworker. With a slow, deliberate breath, Gihun let the weight of the day wash over him, feeling the exhaustion seep into his bones, as if it had been waiting for this exact moment to take hold.

Chapter 10

Gihun hummed to himself as he picked up some fresh meat and vegetables, his mind already wandering to the meals he was planning to prepare.

His hand hovered over the cheaper cut for a moment, but then he paused, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. With a small grin, he pivoted and grabbed the more expensive one, feeling a small surge of satisfaction.

It wasn't every day that an employee managed to avoid getting fired for being late, leaving work early, and not giving proper notice. In fact, it was practically unheard of. Yet, somehow, the CEO had even personally sent a driver to take him home, as if it were no big deal.

This rare stroke of luck felt almost surreal. Gihun couldn't help but feel a strange mix of relief and disbelief. When had anything ever gone this smoothly in his chaotic life? Maybe, just maybe, the universe was finally cutting him a break.

He continued to whistle as he made his way back toward his apartment, a noticeable skip in his step. His hands were fuller now, but his wallet was a little emptier. The weight of the bags was comforting, though, like a small reward for surviving the day. It felt good to have something to look forward to, even if it was just a quiet evening to himself.

"Gihun, you're home early!"

Gihun slowed to a stop, glancing over at his next-door neighbor, Oh-llnam, a kind and gentle older man, who was jogging toward him. The man waved with a grin, effortlessly maintaining his pace even as he caught up to Gihun. However, his expression shifted when he noticed Gihun's face. "You look kinda flushed—are you okay?" he asked, his concern evident in his tone.

Now that he mentioned it… Gihun did feel a bit hot, his head throbbing lightly as sweat began to pour down his face. But he quickly waved it off, offering a reassuring smile to the older man. "Must be the excitement of finally getting to enjoy some good meat today,"

He swung the bag of produce in front of the man, a grin spreading across his face. "Remember to come by my apartment later and grab some! I've got more than enough to go around." He paused, eyes twinkling mischievously. "Limited time offer though. Trust me, you don't want to miss out."

The old man chuckled, shaking his head with a knowing smile. "As tempting as that offer is, I wouldn't want to interrupt your time with your boyfriend. He's been waiting by the door all day!"

Gihun stilled, unable to comprehend what he had just heard. *Boyfriend...?*

"Uh, I don't... huh?"

The old man winked, clearly amused by his reaction. "No need to be embarrassed. To be in love is something to be proud of!" He gave Gihun a light pat on the back before resuming his jog, leaving Gihun standing there, still frozen in confusion, staring after the fading figure of his neighbor.

As Gihun finally reached his floor, still mulling over the old man's cryptic words, his eyes blinked in surprise. There stood none other than his so-called *"elusive boyfriend."*

In front of the door was the police officer who had crashed into him earlier, now holding a bouquet of flowers. He looked out of place, his eyes nervously scanning the area before finally landing on Gihun. The awkward tension was palpable as the officer hesitated, shifting the flowers slightly in his hands, unsure of what to do next.

“What…?” Gihun’s voice faltered for a moment before he continued, “How did you know I lived here?”

The officer hesitated, fumbling with his words as he tried to explain. “Uh, you didn’t come to the station, so I, uh… didn’t know what to do. I figured I’d come look for you,” he said, his voice trailing off awkwardly. “I wasn’t sure where else to… you know, bring the flowers, as an apology for, uh, destroying your car.”

He glanced down at the bouquet, his fingers tightening around the stems, clearly uncomfortable. “I didn’t want to just leave them at your door. Thought I’d try to catch you in person... to, uh, make it right.” His gaze shifted nervously to the ground before meeting Gihun’s eyes again.

Gihun scoffed, clearly unimpressed. He walked up the remaining stairs until he stood directly in front of the officer, setting the bags down on the floor with a little more force than necessary. “That was my favorite car, you know.”

Okay, that was a *lie.* He had actually been meaning to replace it for months, considering it had been breaking down constantly, but the officer didn’t need to know that.

“Right.” The officer—Junho, Gihun noted, glancing at the name tag now that his mind was clearer—scratched at his cheek almost bashfully. “I can’t say sorry enough, if I—” He stopped mid-sentence, his gaze dropping to the floor as if something had caught his attention.

“Sorry, can you just—” Junho quickly shoved the bouquet into Gihun's hands, before crouching down to tie his shoe lace, his movements sudden and flustered.

But before Gihun could say anything, a gasp escaped from his right. His head whipped toward the sound, spotting his landlord a few steps up the staircase, gripping the railing tightly, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Oh my.” She gasped, eyes falling between Junho and Gihun “Didn’t know you had it in you to score someone so handsome Gihun.”

Gihun straightened at her words, his posture stiffening, before his attention returned to Junho, who was still kneeling on the ground, leaning forward as he fumbled with the last loop of his shoelace. The way he was bent over—it almost *looked* like…

His eyes widened in realization, his words tumbling out in a flustered defense. "No, we’re not—no!" Junho blinked up at him in confusion, clearly not understanding the sudden panic, while the landlord just continued to beam at them, oblivious to the tension.

Gihun quickly shoved the bouquet into Junho's hands, hastily unlocked the door, and grabbed the bags of groceries with one hand. With his other hand, he pulled Junho inside, all but dragging him through the doorway.He slammed the door shut, ignoring the landlord’s ecstatic smile peeking through the crack in the door.

Chapter 11

“This is hardly appropriate,”

Junho took another bite of his BBQ, chewing slowly as he stared at Gihun, who gawked back at him in disbelief.

“Excuse me?!” Gihun swallowed hard, staring at Junho to see if there was any sign of a joke, but when he saw none, he crossed his arms and jabbed a finger in the other man’s direction. “What’s inappropriate is you showing up at my doorsteps without any notice!” He grabbed his head in frustration, groaning. “I’m never going to live this down. It’ll take years before anyone believes me!”

Unfazed, the officer simply lifted his bowl, already asking for seconds with his mouth full, as though nothing had happened.

Gihun wanted to hit him hard.

Sighing, Gihun grabbed the bowl to fill it with more rice, scooping it harder than he meant to. Fine, he had been the one to ask if the other was hungry, but he still couldn’t believe it—the man who had wrecked his car, made a mess of his single life, and showed up uninvited was now sitting on his floor, casually mooching off him like they were old friends!

He slammed the bowl in front of Junho, who didn’t even glance up, immediately going back to stuffing his face. Gihun stared at him, mouth twisted in a frown.

There goes his only day off

“You know, this meat’s a bit tough,” Junho remarked, taking a thoughtful pause, as if his words were offering some kind of valuable insight. “My brother always made it a bit more tender.”

Gihun felt a vein throb in his temple. “Well, I’m not your brother, am I?” He snapped, his patience wearing thin. “Quit mooching off me and get out—”

But before Gihun could get another word out, there was a knock at the door. He quickly turned his attention away from Junho, silently praying it wasn’t his neighbor or landlord popping by for an unexpected check-in as he stood up and walked over to open it.

The sight that greeted him was even worse.

Young Il smiled, but Gihun couldn’t help but notice the strain behind it. He held a bouquet of flowers and a bag of food, dressed far from his usual suit, now sporting a simple white long-sleeve button down shirt that did little to hide the gleam of his expensive watch.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Young Il said, his voice tight. "I heard from your landlord that your boyfriend— *fiancé* , I mean—visited you today." His face was stiff, as if each word was being forced through gritted teeth.

Gihun winced at his words as the shorter man's grip on the bag tightened, his knuckles turning white. He almost felt the urge to apologize, but for what, he wasn't sure.

"No, no—" he started, attempting to ease the tension, but the words got caught in his throat as he watched Junho stand up from the table, wiping his mouth with a napkin before walking toward him, as if he wanted to assess the situation. Gihun could feel his heart rate quicken, unsure if the situation was about to get worse, or if Junho would somehow make it even more awkward.

"Excuse me, wh—" Junho stilled, his hands gripping the doorframe as his eyes widened at the man standing in the doorway. Gihun watched as Junho's lips thinned, his voice faltering. "In—"

Then, slowly, he turned to Gihun, his gaze flicking from the flowers in Young Il's hand back to Gihun, his eyes blinking rapidly as his mouth went slack, as if some realization had finally hit him.

"Oh."

Junho's gaze continued to dart between Gihun and Young Il, who was now shooting him a sharp, unimpressed glare. "Ohhhhhh."

"He's not…" the officer started, clearly struggling to find the right words, and Gihun almost couldn't help but grin at his discomfort as he fumbled. "We are not—"

Sighing, Junho pinched the bridge of his nose before unexpectedly bowing deeply toward the other man, much to Gihun's surprise. He straightened up, stiffly offering his hand. Young Il stared at it for a few seconds before reluctantly taking it, and they exchanged a brief shake. Junho cleared his throat and continued, "In—It's nice to meet you, sir. Since the tenant seems to be doing well, I'll be on my way."

Gihun's mouth fell agape. Why was this moocher suddenly being so respectful? Was it because Young Il was wearing that expensive watch? Was he really the type of officer who treated people differently based on what they wore or what they had?

And worst of all, the guy had the audacity to shuffle over, grab the plate of beef, then calmly pick up his hat, place it on his head, and tip it to both of them before making a quick exit. Without a word more, he was out the door, leaving Gihun standing there in stunned silence, wondering if he'd just imagined the entire absurd encounter.

"What did he just—" Gihun blinked, still trying to make sense of everything that had just happened. He looked at Young Il, who, without a word, walked through the door with a relaxed air about him. Casually removing his shoes, he surveyed the small apartment as if nothing unusual had occurred.

Gihun felt his face flush as Young Il's gaze swept across the barren apartment, pausing first on the lighter gun—an impulsive buy from his gambling days when his addiction had reached its peak—and then on the cup holding Junho's flowers. Young Il shoved his own flowers into the same spot, indifferent to how some of the officer's blooms crumpled in the process, their petals wilting under the pressure.

"So your fiancé…" Young Il asked, his back still turned as he walked through a small corridor next to the dining table, then began unloading the contents of his bag onto the kitchen counter. Gihun

followed behind, unsure whether to engage or just let the man do as he pleased. The movement felt almost deliberate, as if Young Il was purposefully not facing him, yet still forcing the conversation forward.

Quickly shaking his head, Gihun denied it. "Not my fiancé, just the guy who crashed into my car this morning."

However, those words made Young Il stop mid-motion. He whipped around to face Gihun, his expression going tense. “He *what* ?!”

Gihun almost jumped back at the tone, his heart racing for a moment. He wasn’t sure what had changed, but something in Young Il’s expression had shifted—he almost looked… angry. No, he was definitely angry.

“Why didn’t you mention that part this morning?” Young Il’s voice was tight, his brows furrowed as he took a step closer.

“I— it didn’t matter!” Gihun stammered, his hands waving as if to brush off the tension. “It was just a few bruises and a cut, anyway. Nothing to worry about.”

His voice trailed off weakly, and he couldn’t help but feel the weight of Young Il’s glare still pressing on him.

Finally, after a moment of tense silence, Young Il sighed, running a hand through his hair in frustration. He then reached out, placing his palm gently on Gihun's forehead. "Like I thought," he muttered, his tone softening slightly. "You looked flushed when I saw you at the door."

“You must be exhausted,” Young Il sighed, his hands falling to his sides, the frustration clear in his tone. “I thought the CEO had arranged for the driver to take you to the hospital. What happened?”

“Well, uh, there was this sale on meat today, and I—” Gihun faltered, his words slipping awkwardly as he tried to justify his actions.

Young Il shook his head, a faint smile curling at his lips. "You're impossible," he muttered, though the fondness in his voice was clear.

"Go get some rest ," Young Il said softly, turning away to unclip the cuff of his sleeves. He rolled them up, then grabbed Gihun's worn apron, tying it around his waist. "I’ll be here when you wake up."

Gihun's heart thudded as he watched Young Il take out a pan, feeling something stir in his chest—a warmth he hadn’t realized he’d been missing, something he thought he’d lost long ago.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Warning: Contains some mild mature content at the start (nothing too graphic though! (<3)

He was drowning.

Gasping for air, his face flushed as the world around him seemed to close in, swallowing him whole. Disoriented, he couldn't place where he was or what was happening, but the touch on his face—so soft, so soothing—felt like a lifeline.

Instinctively, he leaned into it, the feather-light caresses running up his spine, sending a shiver through his body.

It felt too good, almost overwhelming. He didn't want to open his eyes, already aware of the absence of the other's fingers. A soft grunt of frustration escaped him at the loss of contact, but it quickly faded as lips, delicate as feathers, replaced the fingers, tracing his jaw before gliding downward. Strong hands then slipped beneath his loose shirt, grasping his chest with a steady, possessive hold.

Gihun sighed, a wave of contentment washing over him as cold fingers brushed against his heated skin.

Everything felt almost in place at that moment, so perfectly aligned, as if nothing could disrupt the fragile peace that settled between them.

He bit his lip as the other's hand traced back up, cupping his face gently before placing a chaste kiss on his lips. The touch made Gihun squirm, a low murmur of his name slipping from the other's lips, the voice almost sinful in its softness.

It was familiar. Too familiar.

With a breathy sigh, Gihun's eyes fluttered, struggling to open fully as he blinked, a small smile tugging at his lips when his gaze finally locked with -

"SHIT!" Gihun gasped, jolting upright in bed, his head spinning as the cold compress slipped from his forehead and thudded softly onto his lap. *Did he just…? No, he couldn't have.* Tentatively, he grabbed the edge of his blanket and lifted it, glancing underneath, only to slam it back down with a sharp exhale.

There was no denying it; he definitely had a wet dream about his coworker.

The vividness of the dream lingered as his eyes fell on the bowl of porridge and the note next to his bed—both from the very subject of his dreams—making him gnaw at his lips in guilt. He slowly reached over, picking up the note and scanning it:

Make sure to eat. I didn't want to wake you, so I'll be heading off first.

The handwriting was familiar, neat, and clean, just like the man who wrote it. Gihun squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push the thoughts away, but they lingered, persistent and unwelcome.His mind kept replaying the dream, the warmth of the touch, the way his name had sounded on the other's lips-

"GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Gihun let out a guttural scream, his voice muffled by the pillow he buried his face into, trying to smother the wave of humiliation. Frustration vibrated through him, his body rigid, wishing he could erase the entire situation from his mind. The mere thought of his coworker finding out made his chest tighten, a cold dread creeping in.

Wait, it's not like Young Il will ever find out, right?

The thought struck him suddenly, and he froze, his panicked breathing gradually slowing. It was just a dream, right? So as long as he kept it to himself—no harm, no foul. He kicked the blanket off, pausing for a moment as he stood there, staring at it. Slowly, he grabbed it, preparing to toss it in the laundry, but then his mind spiraled again.

Young Il was attractive, undeniably so, and Gihun hadn't fallen into bed with anyone in years. This... this must just be some natural, involuntary reaction to his proximity, the close calls in the office, the unspoken tension. It meant nothing.

Gihun shrugged, a small smile curling on his lips, satisfied with his own explanation. He tossed the blanket into the washer with soap, hit the start button, and stretched as he moved toward the sink to brush his teeth.

It was just a natural reaction. He repeated as he spat out the toothpaste and stared at his reflection in the mirror, deliberately pushing away the nagging feeling in the back of his mind.

It was just a natural reaction. He muttered again as he brewed his coffee and ate the porridge, ignoring how it felt strangely heavy in his stomach.

It was just a natural reaction. He told himself as he climbed onto the bus and paid for the fare.

It was just a natural reaction. He thought as he rode the elevator to his floor.

It was just a nat-

"Young Il—" Junhee's voice cut through his thoughts, and Gihun tensed at the mention of *the name* he'd rather not think about right now, his heart skipping a beat. At the sudden motion, he accidentally slammed his hands into the keyboard, wincing at the loud noise, the sharp action betraying the unease crawling up his spine.

The younger girl stilled, eyebrows raised at the sight of Gihun's disheveled expression. "I'm gonna put this in the nicest way, Gihun... but you look like shit. Are you okay?"

Gihun ran a hand through his hair, trying to force a smile, but it came out more like a grimace. "Yeah... just a rough morning," he muttered, his voice sounding more strained than he'd intended. Yup, it was definitely a *rough* morning, his lips curling slightly at the joke.

His eyes widened at the thought, almost wanting to slam his head on the keyboard as vivid memories of the morning surged back in. *Why did he do this to himself?* The feeling of embarrassment washed over him again, making his stomach churn. He had to stop thinking about it — *just stop thinking about it.*

Then something touched his cheeks, making him hiss at the contact and shield himself away.

"Here," Junhee said, her voice light. Gihun looked up, noticing her hands holding a small herbal tea drink . "Young Il told me to give you this. It will help with your fatigue."

He blinked, caught off guard, his hands automatically wrapping around the bottle as Junhee continued.

“And I put the Samgyetang he bought in the fridge,” she added. “He told me to make sure you ate every bite.” Grinning, she patted him on the shoulder. “Guess I’ll be meeting you on the roof in a few minutes.”

Gihun felt his cheeks tint at the suggestion, quickly placing the herbal tea on his desk. The protest he had been about to voice died in his throat as Junhee walked away, leaving him to grapple with the sudden warmth creeping up his neck. He tried to shake off the feeling, but guilt surged through him as his gaze lingered on the bottle. Sure, he could justify it as a natural reaction all he wanted, but deep down, he knew the truth. He *had* thought about it. He *had* dreamt about his coworker in ways he shouldn’t have, and no amount of self-rationalizing could erase that fact.

A coworker who was more than kind to him, who always thought of him even though Gihun could give nothing in return. That thought gnawed at him as he sat there, staring blankly at the screen. Young Il’s constant acts of thoughtfulness, the small gestures that seemed to carry more meaning than they should—he couldn’t ignore them, and now, they seemed to loom over him like a storm cloud.

With a sigh, he leaned back, the sound of his timer going off pulling him out of his spiraling thoughts. It was time for lunch. He stood up, trying to shake off the heaviness in his chest, but it lingered. His thoughts still churned, tangled in the mess he couldn't quite untangle. As he made his way up the stairs, stew in hand, each step felt heavier than the last.

Of course, he felt grateful—grateful for everything Young Il had done. But that’s all it was supposed to be, right? Gratitude. He had no right to feel anything more than that. After all, what did he have to offer him? His life was a mess, scattered in ways he couldn’t even begin to fix. But then again, wasn’t kindness supposed to be reciprocal? Did that mean he owed Young Il something? Or worse, that he *wanted* to give something back—something more than just a smile or a thank you?

The realization hit him harder than he expected, settling in his chest like a stone. His mind went numb to everything around him as Junhee scrambled up to him on the roof, her eyes wide with panic, but he couldn’t process a single word she said.

It was like—

It was like—

“Oh my god,” Gihun murmured, his throat tight, the words almost choking him. His hands clenched around the bag, his grip tightening as the truth slowly sank in. “I think I like Young Il.”

And all it took was a wet dream to admit that.

As the gravity of his words hit him, Gihun’s eyes widened, a bitter laugh almost escaping him at the absurdity of the situation. Junhee froze at his confession, her smile widening at first before it slowly faltered.

She slapped her own face with both hands before quickly turning and smacking Gihun, who stared at her in stunned silence as she cupped his face between her palms.

“I’m proud of you, Gihun,” she said, her voice oddly sincere. “But this isn’t the time for your gay- or bi awakening!” She met his gaze, took a deep breath, and then grimaced as she reluctantly added the next words, each one bringing Gihun down from the high he had just experienced.

“...Sangwoo is coming back to this department.”

Chapter 13

He had successfully avoided Young Il for a week since the revelation, and he almost wanted to give himself a pat on the back. Sure, he'd made more mistakes than usual on his projects, distracted by thoughts of Sangwoo returning to the department tomorrow and, more importantly, how Young Il smiled, the way his eyes sparkled when he took a bite of Gihun's food, the way—

Gihun groaned, dropping his face onto the desk. There he went again, thinking about what he shouldn't—and this time, he could practically hear Young Il's soft laugh echoing in his head, making it even harder to push the thoughts away.

"Just talk to him already," Junhee sighed, pinching his cheeks. But Gihun didn't move, letting himself sink deeper into his seat, as if he could disappear into it. "You've been avoiding him for days. At this point, you're just making it worse."

Mumbling something unintelligible, too tangled in his own thoughts to respond, Gihun didn't notice Junhee's change in expression. Her eyes widening as she leaned in, her voice filled with disbelief. "Wait... did you just—?" she asked, trailing off in shock.

"Did you say *WIFE* ?"

Junhee exclaimed loudly, causing several workers to pause and glance over in confusion. Gihun jumped up, quickly slapping his hand over her mouth to silence her, his face flushed with panic. "Shh, not so loud!" he hissed, glancing nervously around the room.

He gave everyone an apologetic look, waiting for the room to settle before finally releasing his hand from Junhee's mouth, ignoring her grumbles and pouts. As soon as his hand was free, she grabbed it and yanked him down, forcing them to crouch so they were huddled shoulder to shoulder.

"Don't tell me you're his side piece," Junhee gasped, her eyes widening in genuine shock and worry. "Do you want me to sic Daeho on him? He might seem like a sweetheart, but no doubt he'll turn into a *monster* if he thinks someone's messing with you."

Gihun's mouth twisted into a frown at the word *side piece* and the thought of Daeho fighting Young Il, a wave of discomfort washing over him. He couldn't shake the feeling that Daeho would lose—*very* badly.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head and rubbing his temple. "Not his wife—" He paused, unsure how to continue, the words suddenly feeling too heavy. "I mean, he *did* have a wife, but she passed away a few years ago."

Junhee's expression softened, the anger in her eyes fading away as she processed what he'd just said. "Oh, Gihun…"

With a sigh, Gihun rubbed his face, feeling a wave of nausea rise within him. "I can't do this to him… I just can't. What if he isn't ready? What if I'm forcing—" His voice cracked slightly as he clenched his fists, desperately trying to push the growing panic away, but it was no use. The uncertainty gnawed at him, leaving him feeling trapped between what he wanted and what he feared.

Soft hands gently touched his own, pulling them away from his face. Gihun blinked in surprise, meeting Junhee's gaze. She stayed silent for a moment, studying him carefully.

"I'm sorry, Gihun. But that isn't very fair, is it?"

The older man stilled at her words as she squeezed his hands. . "What right do we have to decide how Young Il grieves or when he decides to love again?" She paused, her voice steady, yet full of compassion. "We can't make that choice for him, Gihun. Not even you."

"Of course, if he shows any sign of discomfort, it's your signal to stop," she continued, her lips curling into a small, knowing smile. "But don't do this to him, Gihun—or to yourself."

Gihun blinked, the words rushing over him in waves, each one hitting harder than the last. He shook his head again, swallowing hard as if trying to force the rising lump in his throat back down. "I—I don't even know if he's into men, Junhee…" It was a weak defense, and he could tell even as the words left his mouth that it didn't hold up. But he grasped at it anyway, hoping it would be enough to justify why he shouldn't go through with what he was about to.

Junhee's expression didn't change for a moment, as if stunned. Then, there was a flicker of something in her eyes—her cheeks puffing up as if she was about to—

"AHAHAHAHAH!"

She burst into laughter, the sound so sudden and loud that Gihun jumped up in shock, his heart racing. He knelt there, frozen for a second, mouth agape as Junhee's laughter filled the room. Taking her hand back from his, she clutched her sides, clearly unable to contain herself, swaying side to side before she laid her head on the side of his desk, howling with laughter.

"Sorry—" The younger girl heaved, coughing from the loss of air before wiping her eyes. "Sorry, sorry. I didn't know you knew how to tell jokes. I haven't laughed in so long!" She giggled again, still catching her breath, her cheeks flushed from the unexpected burst of laughter.

"What do you mean—" Gihun began, but his words faltered when he met Junhee's piercing gaze. Her expression was cool, unblinking, as if she was about to drop a truth he wasn't sure he was ready for.

She crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow. "Are you for real? He doesn't like men? Have you seen the way he looks at you?" Her voice was direct, almost matter-of-fact, but there was a sharpness to it that sliced through his confusion.

Junhee's eyes scanned his face, as if trying to gauge the depth of his confusion, before she sighed heavily. Rising from the ground, she bent down and pulled the older man up, giving his shoulder a playful pat, followed by a scoff.

"If he didn't like men, then I'm not pregnant," she said dryly, her tone full of unspoken sarcasm. "And in no way are either of those things true, Gihun. Get a grip."

"Anyway, give me your phone."

Her eyes sparkled as she held out her hand, the motion reminding Gihun of children who would beg their parents to play mobile games on their phones, their faces filled with that same eager, pleading expression. He hesitated for a moment, but the look in her eyes was impossible to ignore, so he relented—just like he always did.

He watched as her fingers swiped through his phone for a few minutes, his eyes narrowing suspiciously at what she was doing. Each swipe of her finger seemed deliberate, as though she was on a mission, and Gihun could feel his anxiety creeping up.

After what felt like an eternity, Junhee grinned triumphantly and showed the phone screen to Gihun, who stared at it with furrowed eyebrows. Before him were four male figures, each propped in front of an office setting, and each handsomer than the last. The men were posed confidently, dressed sharply in suits, their smiles radiating an almost unnerving level of charm.

“What is this?” Gihun asked, his confusion deepening as he glanced from the phone to Junhee’s smug expression.

Junhee’s grin widened. “It’s an otome game, or dating simulator,” she explained, her voice almost sing-song as she swiped through the various images of impeccably dressed men. She paused for dramatic effect, her finger hovering over the screen as she landed on one of the figures. This man had a static expression, but his suit was so perfectly put together that it almost looked like he’d stepped out of a fashion magazine.

“Figured that since you don’t have much dating experience anymore, why not practice in a setting similar to the one you’re in now?” she said, tapping on the man’s face with a flourish. “Anyway, this is the CEO of the office. He kind of looks like Young Il, doesn’t he?”

Gihun’s eyebrows shot up as he squinted at the screen. “What? You seriously—”

“Shh!” Junhee cut him off, holding up a finger. “Let me set the scene. This guy? A total smooth talker. It’s perfect practice. Besides,” she added with a mischievous glint in her eyes, “if you’re going to keep avoiding Young Il, you might as well get some practice with the *fictional* version.”

“I don’t know…” Gihun stuttered, almost laughing, as if he would ever willingly date a CEO.

Junhee smirked, flicking her fingers at Gihun’s forehead. He winced at the contact, rubbing the spot with a scowl.

“You can always practice on the real deal, of course,” she shrugged nonchalantly. “I put in Young Il’s phone number. I can’t believe you have some random officer’s number but not his,” she clicked her tongue, shaking her head in mock disapproval.

Gihun froze, his heart skipping a beat. "You *what* ?" he sputtered, his voice rising slightly. "Why would you do that?"

Rolling her eyes, she passed the phone back to Gihun. "I asked for his number this morning because I knew you were too chicken to ask for it yourself. And since your phone hasn’t been blowing up with calls or texts all week after you avoided him, I figured you didn’t have it."

And just like she said, there it was—Young Il’s number, sitting at the top with his name, accompanied by a flurry of emojis ranging from sparkles to hearts that Junhee had added.

“You’re welcome,” Junhee said with a dramatic bow, cradling her stomach as she did, while Gihun kept a tight grip on his phone, staring at the screen with a mix of dread and indecision.

After what felt like an eternity, Gihun slowly swiped away the number, his thumb lingering over the screen for a moment before he tapped on the Otome game again. Junhee snorted with laughter as he pressed on the CEO's avatar, not caring if she thought he was a coward—because at that point, he certainly felt like one.

Chapter 14

Amid the bustle of the busy streets below, Gihun sighed, lighting another cigarette and letting the smoke drift lazily into the air as he watched the chaos unfold. The city seemed to hum with energy, yet he felt oddly detached, a silent observer of it all. It didn't help with his nerves at all, only heightening them as his mind was pulled back to the first time he met Young Il, to that afternoon—when everything had started to shift.

He had played Junhee's dating simulator the night before, feeling almost foolish for doing so.It was rated 13+, but despite being a grown man—well outside the age range of its target audience—he found himself losing at every turn, his frustration mounting with each minute.

Somehow, he ended up getting the CEO to fire him on his first day, getting HR called the moment he said 'hello,' having water thrown on him, and—of all things—stumbling upon a route where the CEO shot his best friend, convinced he was cheating on him. That was when he finally had to shut the game off, his head spinning, wondering if he was cursed to be single and lonely for the rest of his life.

But through all the failures, there was one moment that was his saving grace—a moment that made the character's rating soar. He remembered holding his phone up as if it had been touched by divine hands, almost feeling a tear slip down his unshaven face when he saw the character smile during their date…

……. at the festival.

So, here he was, desperate enough to follow the advice of an Otome game, waiting for Young Il to come up to the roof like a lovesick schoolgirl, just so he could ask him to the street festival that was happening in a few days

He'd even packed a larger lunch than usual, hoping it might impress him—or at least give him something to talk about. But what was he even going to say? *'I had an awakening, realized I'm actually in love with you—so, wanna go to a festival with me like we're in some cheesy romance game?'*

Nearly groaning aloud just thinking about it, Gihun almost missed the sound of the rooftop door creaking open behind him.Hearing the door close, he took a slow breath, flicked the cigarette to the ground, stomped it out, and wiped his palms on his pants.Throughout the whole process, the other person stayed silent, giving Gihun just enough time for one last self-check before he turned around and offered a sheepish grin

However, that smile dropped as quickly as it had appeared, his eyes widening in shock, lips pursed. It wasn't Young Il standing in front of him….

...rather, it was the last person he wanted to see: *Sangwoo*

Sangwoo stood before him, dressed in a tailored suit, his signature framed glasses, and perfectly styled hair—only now with strained, tired eyes and heavy bags beneath them, making him appear far older than his years. After years of the other man cutting contact, Gihun could only stare, frozen in place, as if he had forgotten how to move.

However, Gihun didn't need to act, as Sangwoo made the first move, stepping forward. Gihun flinched, watching as Sangwoo paused, seeming to notice his discomfort.

Sighing, Sangwoo ran a hand through his hair, messing it up as he leaned back slightly, his eyes still locked on Gihun. He offered a tired smile, one that didn't quite reach his eyes, the kind of smile that felt more like a reflex than anything genuine.

"Hyung. I thought I'd find you here."

The older man nearly choked at the sound of the endearing title, a small pang of something unfamiliar tugging at his chest. He had always teased Sangwoo, joking that his 'dear Hyung' would always be there for him, like some kind of unspoken promise.

Gihun's eyes slid over Sangwoo's expensive suit, the sharp lines of the fabric only amplifying the bitterness rising in his throat.The man in front of him looked nothing like the one he had once known—the one who had stayed by his side with that same careless ease. It was clear now: Sangwoo didn't need his *Hyung* after all, not in the way Gihun had once imagined. Maybe he never had.

"Sangwoo." Gihun closed his eyes, his heart thudding in his chest. "I didn't think I'd ever hear from you again..." His voice faltered, as if the words had been stuck in his throat for years, finally breaking free. He was angry, of course, at first. Sangwoo had done so much to hurt the others. Gihun tried—he really did—to ignore him, to hate him, to bury it all deep down. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't.

Yet, Sangwoo had seemingly made the decision for them, cutting off all ties and moving to a new office, chasing his promotion as if they—especially Gihun—were nothing but chains holding him back.

It stung, even now, to realize how easily he'd been discarded. But as Gihun stood there, staring at the man's face, everything he thought he'd buried came flooding back—memories, regrets, the raw, lingering ache of unfinished business.

"Why did you even come back?" Gihun's voice cracked as the words spilled out, his anger boiling over before Sangwoo could even respond. His hands became more animated, gestures sharp and desperate, while his face flushed with a heat that went beyond just the anger. "I thought you never wanted to see us again,after everything you—"His words caught in his throat, as if he could barely finish what he was about to say.

"I didn't—" Sangwoo froze, frustration radiating from him, his voice rising to match Gihun's. "What was I supposed to do, Gihun? I did what I had to! My mother needed me!" He exhaled

sharply, his eyes desperate, as if silently begging for some understanding, some comfort. “You get it, don’t you? You must, Gihun. If you were in my position, you would’ve done the same.”

Gihun’s breath hitched as a headache began to pulse at his temples. His face fell, surrendering to a resignation that had festered for years. “That’s not it, Sangwoo,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

He sighed deeply, leaning heavily against the railing. “Even now, you don’t get it. It’s not the betrayal that hurts the most. It’s the fact that you didn’t even look at us when you did it. You chose to run instead.” His eyes shut briefly, gathering himself before speaking again, his voice thick with raw, unhealed pain.“Did you even know... that my mother passed away a few years ago? Just a few weeks after you left?”

This time, Sangwoo flinched, guilt and surprise flooding his face. Gihun studied him, watching as his lips twitched—parting slightly before snapping shut, as if he didn’t know what to say. But before Sangwoo could gather himself to speak, the rooftop door creaked open again. Young Il stepped onto the roof, his eyes locking onto Sangwoo with a cold, unreadable expression.

Sangwoo, in turn, didn’t back down from the glare. His surprised expression quickly morphed into one of raw anger, his eyes narrowing as he locked onto Young Il. His hands balled into fists, trembling with restrained fury.

“You—”

“Young Il!” Gihun perked up, a small, almost mischievous smile curling at the corners of his lips as he approached the shorter man. He ignored the intense gaze that Sangwoo was now drilling into him, his focus entirely on Young Il. Gihun scratched his cheek, the nervous energy he felt before giving way to something lighter, almost relieved, as the younger man’s face softened slightly.“I know I asked you to come here on short notice, but—”

“Young Il?”

The two men turned toward Sangwoo, who was now glaring at them, his jaw clenched tight in disbelief. “Gihun, how do you know—” His words faltered as his eyes shifted to Young Il, recognition flickering across his face, followed by a deepening scowl.

Gihun stilled, his gaze shifting to Sangwoo, blinking owlishly at his thunderous expression. “You know Young Il?” he asked, his voice steady, though tinged with uncertainty.

In response, Sangwoo let out a bitter laugh. “Young Il, is it?” he said, his tone dripping with disdain. Young Il’s mouth thinned, his jaw tightening as he met Sangwoo’s gaze.

Sweat began to pool on Gihun’s forehead, his stomach tightening as the atmosphere grew heavier. He didn’t know what kind of history they shared, but he could feel the tension crackling between them, thick and charged with something unsaid. Whatever the relationship was, it certainly didn’t look good.

“Hyung...” Sangwoo’s hand shot out, wrapping around Gihun’s, his fingers tightening around his as if he couldn’t let go. Gihun looked down at their hands, unable to tear his gaze away from their joined palms.

“He’s not good for you,” Sangwoo’s voice was soft, almost urgent. “Please… trust me-”

Gihun’s heart almost melted at the sight. He might be angry at Sangwoo, but he’d never denied that he was weak to moments like this—when Sangwoo let down his guard, revealing a side of him Gihun had almost forgotten existed.

“ *Trust you* ?” Young Il pulled his hand away from Sangwoo’s grasp, his strained smile barely masking the edge in his voice. “Hasn’t your *poor hyung* trusted you enough already?” His words were laced with malice, and Gihun’s face flushed, heat creeping up his neck.

Did he overhear everything that had been said?

But before he could let that thought sit, Sangwoo gritted his teeth, letting out a mocking laugh. “So, he should trust you?” He yanked Gihun toward him with a sharp tug, earning a quick yelp. “You’re being hypocritical, *Young Il* .” The words hung heavily in the air, as they wrapped around the shorter man’s name.

Gihun’s head spun as the two started bickering, dragging him along with every heated word. The arguments blurred into a chaotic mess of noise, and soon, he couldn’t keep up or make sense of what they were saying as the tension thickened with every passing second.

“STOP!” Gihun yelped, taking a step back as the weight of the tension became unbearable. To his surprise, the two men actually paused, their argument grinding to a halt as they turned to him.

He was about to grin at the small victory, ready to reprimand them both for their childish behavior, but the moment was short-lived. As soon as their attention shifted to him, both Young Il and Sangwoo moved in sync, their hands grabbing his wrists with a grip that left no room for escape.

“Hyung.” A chill ran down his spine as he met Sangwoo’s gaze, his face soft and pliable. “You believe me, don’t you?”

“Uh I—” Gihun squeaked, trying to pull his hand free, but Sangwoo’s grip only tightened in response. Panic surged through him as he turned to Young Il for help, but his heart sank when he saw how the shorter man’s hands only tightened around his other wrist.

Young Il’s smirk was tight, almost pained, as though every muscle in his face had to work to hold it in place. His eyes, however, were anything but playful—cold and unreadable, as if he had made a decision long before Gihun even realized what was happening.

“ *Hyung* ~ you will come with me, right?” Young Il’s voice was sweet but chilling, the words coated in a false warmth. It was as if he were asking for permission, but the grip on his wrists said otherwise.

Gihun felt his stomach churn at the sight, his eyes flickering between Sangwoo and Young Il, each holding his gaze with a quiet intensity that made the air feel suffocating.

“I— I…” he stuttered, feeling bile rise in his throat as he struggled to break free from their grip. “I feel like I’m about to throw up.”

So he did just that..right on *Sangwoo's suit.*

Chapter 15

He almost found himself thankful for throwing up on Sangwoo the day before. That moment of chaos had given him the split second he needed to tear himself free from their clutches, to break away from the suffocating grip of both men.As he ran, he glanced back and saw Sangwoo and Young Il standing there, stunned, staring at the stain on the taller man's shirt in disbelief, leaving him red-faced and mortified.But it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was out— *even if just for a heartbeat* , he had escaped the agonizing torture of being trapped between them.

However, their argument didn't stop—it only spilled into the next day. Gihun couldn't shake the feeling that he was constantly aware of them, always catching glimpses of one or both of them in the corner of his eye,their presence hanging over him with every passing minute.

When Gihun stood up to grab his coffee, there was Sangwoo, already at his desk, handing it to him before he'd even had the chance to stretch. Made exactly how he liked it—extra sugar, just like clockwork. Gihun had promised himself he'd ignore him, but as he took the cup from Sangwoo's hand, he couldn't stop the softening feeling that washed over him. At least, not until Sangwoo made it his personal mission to show up every time Gihun so much as glanced at something he needed, or even sighed a little in discomfort.

Young Il was even worse. For reasons Gihun couldn't quite grasp, the younger man had taken it upon himself to follow him around the office.When Gihun told him he needed to work, Young Il just pulled up a chair, crossed his legs, and plopped down next to him, lazily resting his head on his left hand.That infuriating grin never left his face as he stared at Gihun—like a predator sizing up its prey.

Every time Gihun tried to focus, hoping Young Il would finally get the hint and leave, the younger man would simply move closer, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere.So, he did the only thing he could think of—he buried himself in his work, trying to block out the constant pressure of Young Il's presence. But whenever he mustered the confidence to glance up, his eyes would meet Young Il's, and there it was— that grin, unshakable and widening with every passing second. It was maddening, making concentration feel like an exercise in futility.

And, as if that wasn't enough, Young Il even decided to follow him to the bathroom. Gihun could feel his eyes on him, a constant presence as he stood there awkwardly, facing the wall, trying to do his business. It was as if the younger man had claimed every inch of his space, turning even the most mundane moments into a bizarre power struggle.

With *who*, he could only guess.

"Don't you have work to do?" Gihun grimaced as he washed his hands, not caring if some water splashed onto Young Il from their close proximity. In the mirror, he caught a glimpse of the younger man smirking, completely unbothered. He crossed his arms, tilted his head, and casually replied, "I have the day off."

Gihun gawked at him, his face frozen in shock.

Did he really just waste his entire day off to follow him around and stare ?

He couldn't decide whether to be flattered or utterly horrified. What kind of person does that?

“Uh—” Gihun hesitated, his gaze flickering to the shorter man. Caught off guard, he wasn’t sure how to respond, the suddenness of it all leaving him momentarily speechless. Still...he quickly glanced toward the door, scanning the area to make sure they were alone. As strange as it felt, it was the perfect opportunity to ask Young Il to the festival—especially since he’d missed his chance yesterday.

Shuffling his feet, he cleared his throat, standing a little taller, hoping to mask his nerves. “So, there’s this festival…”

He trailed off, cursing himself inwardly for sounding like a nervous mess. He couldn’t even remember why this felt so difficult, but the words felt stuck in his throat. Maybe it was because, despite everything, he wasn’t sure what Young Il would say—or if this would end badly, even though he tried to convince himself it would be okay. The last thing he wanted was to put the other man in an awkward situation he couldn’t get out of.

“I was hoping you’re available to go with me,” he blurted out, watching as Young Il’s grin faltered for a moment, his eyes widening in surprise. Gihun’s heart skipped a beat, and he quickly scrambled to fill the silence, waving his hands in a flustered panic. “I mean, if you want to, of course! There’ll be other people there too. And feel free to invite anyone else, if you’d rather hang out with them instead.”

The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush, and he winced inwardly, already regretting every decision that led him to this point. Why did he think asking the shorter man out on a date in a bathroom of all places was a good idea? It was probably the least romantic spot he could imagine. But when he anxiously looked back again at the shorter man, he caught the faintest hint of something in Young Il’s eyes that almost looked like disappointment?

“I almost thought you were asking me on a date?” Young Il’s lips curled up, softening his expression, making him look younger, almost teasing. Gihun’s face flushed, caught completely off guard by how easily Young Il had read him.

He swallowed, but made no move to dismiss or confirm the other man's suggestion.

At first, he *had* wanted to go with just Young Il, imagining the drinks they could share, the conversation, the chance to relax. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized he wasn't sure how it would go. If the whole night turned awkward or uncomfortable, he didn't want to be stuck alone, nursing drink after drink to drown out the sadness.

"I—"

The door slammed open, cutting Gihun off mid-sentence. Both he and Young Il turned toward the sound, finding Sangwoo standing in the doorway, panting with his brow furrowed in concern.

"There you are!" he said, his voice tinged with worry. "You haven't come back in a while, and I saw you shivering earlier. So I got some med—"

He paused mid-sentence as his gaze shifted to the man standing behind Gihun, his expression instantly darkening. The corners of his mouth tightened into a scowl, and his eyes narrowed with a hint of fury.

"What are you doing here?" he spat, his tone low and sharp.

Unfazed, Young Il flashed a knowing smile, his eyes glinting with amusement. "Well, this is the bathroom," he said casually, his voice light. "Not sure you have much say over who's here, do you?"

"Why are you here with Gihun?" Sangwoo growled, stepping forward, his voice laced with tension.Young Il quickly moved in front of Gihun, positioning himself between them like an immovable wall. He stood his ground, refusing to let the taller man take another step forward."I told you to leave him alone,"

Sangwoo eyed Young Il, his gaze sharp and heated with obvious irritation, as if daring him to make the next move.

Then, with a clenched fist, Sangwoo slowly bent down toward Young Il, whispering something in his ear that Gihun couldn't quite catch. He was able to make out a word or two, though—something about "truth" and "own."

But whatever was said, whatever meaning those words carried, made Young Il flinch—his usual calm composure slipping for just a second. It was so unlike him, that brief crack in his confident facade, that Gihun couldn't help but notice. The shift was subtle but telling, signaling something Gihun definitely didn't want to be caught in the middle of. As the two men stared each other down, the tension grew, palpable and heavy in the air.Gihun could feel it—a creeping sense of déjà vu, knowing that something was inevitably bound to break.

He sighed, took a deep breath, and forced a smile as he approached the two. However, he didn't stop there. Instead, he shoved past them, heading straight for the door. The moment he reached it, he bolted, shouting over his shoulder for them to leave him alone as they chased after him, demanding to know whose side he was on.

Chapter 16

The streets were alive with the hum of activity, vibrant lights illuminating every corner as Gihun bounced on his heels, excitement bubbling within him. He waved enthusiastically at Sae Byeok and Ji Yeong, his smile infectious. Though his main reason for coming to the festival was to finally confess his feelings for Young Il—or something close to it—the night held a deeper significance. It had been years since he'd stepped foot in a festival, the last time being when he'd taken his daughter, back when she still lived in Korea.

"Gihun!" Ji Yeong's voice called out, and before he could even respond, she wrapped him in a tight hug. Sae Byeok, always poised, gave a small nod in greeting. But it was the subtle smile tugging at her lips that caught his attention. His eyes followed her gaze to a group of kids racing past with sparklers, their excited laughter cutting through the air. It wasn't just the carefree scene that warmed his heart—it was the softening in Sae Byeok's expression, a rare moment where she seemed to truly soak in the joy of the night.

"How have you been?" Gihun exclaimed, pulling Ji Yeong into another tight hug, his voice full of warmth. She giggled and pulled back, a grin spreading across her face as she reached for Sae Byeok's arm.

"How's the café going?" he continued, his tone apologetic. "Sorry I haven't had the chance to go out of the city lately..." He scratched the back of his neck, feeling a bit sheepish. Between work and everything else, time had slipped away faster than he'd realized, and he missed those little moments of catching up.

Sae Byeok smirked, raising an eyebrow as she studied him with a knowing look. "Busy, huh?" she teased, her lips curling into a playful grin. "Must have been busy eyeing someone, I bet?

Gihun felt his face flush, the teasing from the two girls making him squirm. Just as he was about to stammer out a response, a familiar voice rang out, providing him with a much-needed escape. He turned just in time to see Dae Ho sprinting toward them, arms wide as if on a mission.Without missing a beat, he pulled them all into a big, bear-like hug, laughing as he did. Jung Bae and Junhee followed closely behind, shaking their heads with amused grins as they watched the scene unfold.

Smiling, Gihun felt his cheeks ache from the force of it. After the company let them all go, most of them had scattered, moving far from the city. These reunions had become few and far between. Yet, despite the time and distance, the moment they caught wind of his struggles, they didn't blink. They dropped everything—no questions asked—and showed up, just like that.

However, that brief sense of ease quickly evaporated as his stomach sank. He looked up to see a familiar face awkwardly shuffling toward them, Daeho waving him over.

It was that damn moocher!

Still in his uniform, Junho's eyes widened when he finally caught sight of Gihun, mouth agape and staring at him. Dae Ho, completely oblivious to the tension, threw an arm around Junho, flashing a toothy grin as he pointed to the other man, now deliberately avoiding Gihun's gaze.

"I hope it's okay that I invited Junho!" Dae Ho beamed. "We work at the same precinct. When he told me he was just going to go home and watch trashy TV, I told him he should come to the

festival instead!"

Gihun blinked, then let out a deep sigh, the small smile tugging at his lips before he could stop it. Despite being a damn moocher, if he was friends with Dae Ho, he couldn't be that bad, right? Sure, he crashed his car into him—oh, and let's not forget the time he *stole* his bowl of beef—but at least the guy kept his word.

He helped him sort through the whole mess afterward, even with the endless phone calls that dragged on for hours just to make sure he got the best compensation. It was more than Gihun could say for some people.

Thankfully, the awkward tension didn't have time to settle as Ali came sprinting toward them, his energy infectious. He was practically bouncing with excitement, already holding a bag of cotton candy in his hands. Gihun couldn't help but laugh, his cheeks warming as his gaze landed on Young Il, who was walking just behind Ali.

The younger man was casually smiling, the kind of smile that seemed to light up his whole face, effortlessly adding to his already handsome features.

"There was so much to do, sir, and I got lost, but…" Ali gestured toward Young Il with a wide grin before continuing, "This hyung helped me find my way! I couldn't believe my luck when he told me he was meeting up with you too."

Gihun watched as the group turned to Young Il, all eyes narrowing in his direction, suddenly tense. It wasn't like he thought they'd have a bad impression of him, but the way they were eyeing him made him uneasy.

Dae Ho was the first to speak up, tugging at Junho's sleeve and laughing. "I kinda thought about it, but it seemed a little silly. From the things you told me, I didn't think he'd enjoy this kind of stuff... But for a minute, I seriously thought that he kind of looked like your br-!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Junho slapped his hand over Dae Ho's mouth, his face as pale as a ghost. "Uh, we—" Stuttering, Junho shot a frantic glance at Gihun, before quickly yanking Dae Ho away, still covering his mouth with one hand, and dragging him toward the nearest food stall.

Gihun blinked in confusion, still processing what had just happened. Maybe they just wanted some time to themselves—after all, the group was pretty big, and the sudden shift in attention probably made things feel a little crowded. He glanced around, noting how each of his friends was now shifting their focus, until his gaze landed on Sae Byeok.

Her expression was far from the friendly smiles the others wore. Instead, her face was set in a hard glare, her eyes locked directly on Young Il.

"So, this is Young Il?" Sae Byeok's voice cut through the air, colder than a winter breeze. Her eyes were still locked on him, a quiet scrutiny in her gaze, like she was trying to size him up or pick apart some hidden truth.

Young Il didn't flinch, not even a little. Instead, he smirked, leaning in just a fraction closer to Gihun, too close for comfort, forcing Gihun to take an awkward step back. The heat rushed to his face at the unexpected proximity, his pulse quickening in response.

"Yup!" Junhee's giggle rang out. She shot a quick glance at Jung Bae, who had that mischievous glint in his eye. Without missing a beat, he wiggled his eyebrows and chimed in, "His sugar daddy."

Gihun gasped, his head snapping toward Young Il, his face burning with embarrassment. He opened his mouth, ready to apologize for his friend's awkward comment, but then froze. Young Il was staring back at him, an eyebrow raised in amusement, that smirk still firmly in place. The playful look in his eyes made Gihun's heart race, and for a moment, he couldn't remember what he'd planned to say.

He couldn't tell if it was the lighting or his own nerves, but for a split second, Young Il almost looked... pleased? That tiny flicker of satisfaction made Gihun quickly look away, his gaze darting to the ground as if he could shake off the heat flooding his face. He tried to focus on anything but the way Young Il's eyes lingered, too intense, too knowing.

However, when his gaze shifted back to Sae Byeok, the sharp contrast hit him immediately—her face was anything but pleased. In fact, she looked downright livid, her brows furrowed and lips pressed into a tight line.

"Sae Byeok, look! They have that game we used to play as kids—Green Light, Red Light!" Ji Yeong exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as she pointed excitedly ahead.

Sae Byeok glanced at her, her expression softening, the tension easing from her face. She followed Ji Yeong's gaze to the game booth, but then her attention shifted back to Young Il, who was now talking with Junhee. Her face tightened again, and for a brief moment, she seemed conflicted. With a deep sigh, she looked at Gihun, then abruptly walked over to him, pulling him aside.

"Give me Sangwoo's number," Sae Byeok demanded, her eyes narrowing. The older man stared at her in disbelief, unsure if she was joking. But there was no humor in her expression. She gritted her teeth and, without another word, pulled out her phone and handed it to him. "I know you have it. He probably shoved it at you the moment he came back into the office."

"Wait—" Gihun blinked, his face a mixture of confusion and concern as he took the phone. "I thought—"

"That asshole is the last person I want to talk to," she muttered, frustration evident in her voice. She sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of her nose. "But... knowing him and his desperation to get back in your good graces... he probably didn't tell you—" Her voice dropped to a near whisper, as if the last part was something she hadn't meant to share, meant only for her.

Gihun bit his lip, torn between hesitation and concern. On one hand, he didn't want her to get hurt again, but on the other, he couldn't ignore the desperate look in her eyes. With a quiet resolve, he made up his mind, inputting the number into her phone and handing it back to her.

"If you ever need help with anything, you can always come to me," Gihun said gently, his tone sincere. "I know Sangwoo used to help you with the tougher tasks, and while I might not be as useful in that way...but-."

The younger girl cut off his rambling with a swift shake of her head, slipping the phone into her pocket as they turned back to the group. "No, no, of course not. This is just something I need to talk to him about, that's all," she said, her voice steady but carrying a hint of finality. Her gaze flickered toward Young Il for a moment, then softened as she turned to Ji Yeong, who had been patiently waiting for their conversation to finish.

Sae Byeok’s expression shifted, her lips curving into a small, genuine smile as she followed Ji Yeong toward the game. Whatever was on her mind seemed to fade, at least for now, replaced by the simplicity of the moment—a chance to enjoy the festival.

Chapter 17

Gihun stood frozen, his mouth agape, slowly turning to Young Il as his three friends mirrored his reaction. But Young Il's focus never wavered—his eyes were locked onto the target ahead. Without a second thought, he shot down another sign, this time a drawing of a man in a pink suit and blank mask, doing a circular motion above his head. The employee running the stand replicated the same movement, his arm raised in perfect sync with the drawing.

He had chosen this game with some unspoken hope—maybe to impress Young Il, or perhaps to recreate that moment from the Otome game, where the CEO had that star-struck expression when he won the big prize for him. Yet, as his eyes blinked in disbelief, reality hit him. Another sign was shot down. Then another. And another. Each one landing with a perfect, resounding thud. It seemed the roles had reversed—now, it was *him* who was left staring, starstruck.His mouth went dry as the perfect streak of precision unfolded before his eyes.

However, as Young Il turned to him, a subtle smile curled at the corners of his lips. His gaze flickered briefly to where Gihun was staring, as if catching the wrong idea.

"Two more," Young Il said with a knowing grin, his voice light as he handed the money to the employee.Young Il, already prepared, steadied the gun in his hands, ready to fire. "I think I'll go for the bigger prize this time." The calm confidence in his voice suggested that this was less about the challenge and more about the certainty of success.

Without so much as a blink, and despite the signs spinning faster with each passing moment, Young Il had already shot down the required number. The sharp thud of each sign hitting the ground seemed almost rhythmic now, a steady beat that marked his effortless precision. In no time at all, he had collected enough to claim his prize.

Gihun's face flushed as he watched Young Il casually hand him the oversized version of the character on the sign—a plush so large it practically engulfed his entire face.

"How did you get so good at this?" Junhee's eyes widened in disbelief, her voice tinged with awe, while Jung Bae and Ali exchanged similar expressions of surprise. Each of them was already clutching an assortment of prizes and snacks, all courtesy of Young Il.

"I've always believed these games were a scam…" Jung Bae added, trailing off as he looked at the growing pile of loot in their hands.

Ali, not missing a beat, threw in his own comment, "Yeah, but now I'm starting to think maybe *we've* been the ones scamming the stands tonight… all along."

"That was pretty amazing!" another voice piped up next to them, causing all five of them to turn toward the sound. A pair of girls stood nearby, waiting for their turn at the game. The taller girl, her posture straight and confident, flashed a smile at Young Il as she readied her own gun. "I was a former sergeant in the military, but I've never seen anyone shoot like that. Did you learn how to shoot there?"

Gihun perked up at the question, his grip tightening around the giant doll in his hands, though it made it difficult to both see and listen in clearly. Still, his curiosity was piqued, and he couldn't help but lean in a little, eager to learn more about Young Il.

Young Il only shook his head, a faint, almost tense smile tugging at the corners of his lips. His gaze briefly flickered to Gihun before returning to the woman, as if weighing the question carefully in his mind.

"No," he finally said, his voice smooth but carrying a subtle weight, as if the answer was more complicated than it seemed. "I didn't learn in the military. Just got lucky."

The girl didn't seem entirely convinced, but she didn't press the issue. With a small shrug, she refocused on the game, eyes narrowing as she took aim at her target. Her partner cheered her on, her voice filled with encouragement.

"Well… I hope I get lucky today too," she muttered under her breath, her finger pulling the trigger.

The shot rang out, and with startling precision, the target dropped in an almost identical manner to how Young Il had taken his down.

However, the man didn't answer. Instead, he turned toward Gihun, a smile curling on his lips—soft and gentle.

"Do you want to play that together?" Young Il asked, gesturing toward the booth where a large target sat, surrounded by several water guns. It was one of those games where you had to shoot a stream of water into a small target, racing against the other players to fill up the container and win a prize.

Gihun turned toward where Young Il was pointing and almost felt himself relax at the sight. It was a familiar booth—one he and Jung Bae used to gravitate toward whenever they went to the festival together back in their school day. But instead of aiming at the targets, they'd shoot each other, drenching themselves and everything around them. The shop owner would shout at them to get lost, his voice frustrated, but neither of them cared. They'd just laugh harder, drenched but still having the time of their lives.

As much as Gihun wanted to step into the moment with Young Il, something held him back. A familiar ache tugged at his chest—a sense of nostalgia for those simpler times with Jung Bae. This game, this tradition, was something only they shared. It felt wrong to just let it go, especially when the memory of their carefree laughter was so vivid in his mind.

Gihun shook his head with a small, almost apologetic smile. "I think I'll be playing with Jung Bae for this one," he said, his voice soft but firm.

At Gihun's words, Young Il's smile wavered for a brief moment, his gaze momentarily clouded. It was as if Gihun's response had caught him off guard, and for the first time, his usual confidence faltered.

"Ah..." he said softly, as if trying to process the unexpected turn in the conversation. He paused, then nodded, his expression shifting slightly. "I see."

"Oh my god! Jungbae! Ali!" Junhee's voice broke into their conversation, her tone more deliberate as she grabbed Ali and Jung Bae. "Look, it's tteokbokki."

Both men exchanged a brief glance, then looked over at Young Il and Gihun before silently following Junhee without a word

The sudden shift left an awkward silence hanging in the air, with the bustling sounds of the carnival continuing all around them.

And just like that, it was only Young Il and Gihun *standing there* .

Gihun gaped at the retreating figures, his heart racing as sweat pooled on his brow and his hands felt clammy to the touch. *Did they just—?*

His mind struggled to catch up with what had just happened.

"Are you hungry?" Young Il spoke up, his smile returning, more genuine this time, as if the tension had momentarily lifted. "Want to grab some soju? My treat."

Not knowing what to think or how to act now that everyone had left, Gihun nodded almost instinctively at Young Il's suggestion, a small sense of relief washing over him. He felt grateful, in a way, that the man had stepped in to break the silence and offer a distraction.

So there they were, standing at the stall, waiting for their turn. Young Il's hand was casually holding Gihun's free one, the contact almost effortless, like it had always been that way. The warmth of the grip seemed to anchor Gihun in the moment, the smile on his face growing more natural with each passing second. It felt comfortable, like this—almost like something that had been long overdue.

But then, out of nowhere, the quiet was broken.

"What the fuck." A familiar tuft of purple hair spiked up as a scowl, just as recognizable as the last time Gihun saw it, settled on the figure's face. "You old fucks again?"But he wasn't alone this time. Standing next to him were two other figures, one sporting a scowl almost identical to the first, their expressions so intense it could rival Thanos's infamous frown. They looked like twins in frustration. Gihun blinked, his mind racing to place the other familiar face.

Myung-gi?

His heart skipped a beat. There, standing among the sea of irritation, was Myung-gi, looking not only frustrated but almost *afraid* —completely out of place amidst the tension

Thanos paused, his bewilderment shifting as he turned to the other figure with a similarly sour expression. "Yo, is this like a gay festival or something? Nam Gyu, I swear—"

"Myung-gi, what are you doing here?"

Young Il's voice was icy, his gaze fixed on Myung Gi with a sharpness that could cut through glass. The younger man shrunk under the weight of his stare, eyes darting nervously to the ground.

"Oh, him?" Thanos chuckled, throwing an arm around Myung Gi's shoulders. The smaller man flinched, keeping his gaze glued to the floor. Nam Gyu, still with that same sour expression, poked

Myung Gi's face like it was some kind of joke. "This guy here made me lose a shitload of money on stocks a few years ago. Now that he's got a job, I figure it's only fair he pays me back."

He turned his attention back to Myung Gi, his grip tightening on the younger man's shoulder as his face darkened, now serious. "Right, Myung Gi~?

"FUCK!" Myung Gi snapped, shoving the hand from his neck. "I never told you to do that! You're the one who decided to make the bet!"

The commotion was starting to draw a crowd, with whispers spreading quickly among the onlookers. People leaned in, exchanging curious glances, eager to catch every word of the unfolding confrontation.

"Ha." Thanos sneered, his hands pulling back like he was about to throw a punch. "Then who the hell told me to do it, huh?!"

His voice was low, menacing, as his eyes bored into Myung Gi, daring him to answer

Gihun clenched his teeth, his eyes narrowing as he watched the scene unfold. Even though he did not like Myung Gi, he couldn't stand seeing him treated like this. Just as he stepped forward to intervene, Young Il moved swiftly, grabbing Thanos by the neck and hurling him to the floor. Without missing a beat, he kicked Nam-Gyu, sending him tumbling with a thud.

The sound of him hitting the pavement snapped Gihun out of his thoughts, his heart pounding in his chest. The crowd around them had quieted, watching in tense silence. Young Il turned to him, his expression unreadable, but there was a sharpness in his eyes that Gihun had never seen before.

It was kind of—

Kind of *overwhelming* .

Gihun swallowed, struggling to push down the heat that flushed his face as the two men on the floor, stunned and wide-eyed, scrambled to their feet. They shot one last look at Young Il, their expressions a mix of shock and fear, before quickly backing away.

Myung Gi, in contrast, offered a brief bow of gratitude, his gaze briefly meeting Young Il's before he turned and walked off.

However, Gihun's focus wasn't on them anymore. His gaze was locked on Young Il, who stepped forward, paid for their food and drinks as though the whole scene had never occurred. His actions were smooth, unaffected, as if the altercation hadn't even registered.

With an easy, almost effortless motion, Young Il extended his hand toward Gihun, a reassuring smile curving on his lips. It was the same smile that always made Gihun feel like everything was okay, even when things were far from it.

Gihun stood there for a moment as he clutched his plush closer, caught in the pull of Young Il's presence. Then, almost instinctively, he took the offered hand, letting Young Il lead him away from the chaos. They walked in silence toward a bench tucked away from the crowd, the noise and tension slipping away as they moved further from the commotion.

There at the bench, the awkwardness melted away. Time seemed to slow down as they sat side by side, sipping on their drinks and laughing over the most ridiculous office moments—trying to mimic Thanos' way of rapping, pretending to be serious about it, and tossing snacks to the birds that fluttered nearby. The sound of their laughter was like music, blending perfectly with the soft night air, and for a moment, everything felt light, easy, and right.

They fed each other snacks between chuckles, passing bits of fruit and chips, teasing each other with exaggerated expressions of disgust or delight at the random foods. It felt carefree, natural, like this was how it was meant to be, and no words needed to be said for it to feel perfect.

But at some point, without either of them realizing it, they had moved closer. Little by little, their shoulders brushed, their knees touched, the space between them shrinking until it felt almost magnetic. Their gazes locked, eyes holding each other for a moment longer than usual, and the playful banter quieted.

His heart raced, a steady thump he couldn't quite place as he sat beside Young Il, now that they were truly alone. Their shoulders brushed like they always did, but tonight, it felt different—like everything had shifted into place, as if this moment had been waiting for them all along. The words he wanted to say were right there, just beyond his lips, but something—some quiet hesitation—held him back.

"I—" Gihun started, but his voice faltered, caught in the intensity of Young Il's gaze, as if the other man already understood everything without needing to hear it.

Slowly, Young Il moved even closer, as if there could be no closer, before his lips met Gihun's. It was soft, sweet, and chaste—a kiss that felt like a delicate promise rather than a moment of passion. The sensation was so tender that Gihun's breath hitched, and he found himself gripping the edge of the bench, fingers curling into the wood as if to steady himself.

He was too old to feel this way, wasn't he? Too old to be caught in this dizzying rush of emotions, so caught up in the feeling of warmth, of connection, of something more than just friendship.

But it felt right. A need he couldn't control, a pull so natural it was impossible to deny. When they finally pulled away—almost reluctantly—Gihun caught a glimpse of it in Young Il's eyes. That same hunger, that same unspoken understanding.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The world seemed to pause around them, as if holding its breath, waiting for the next step. Gihun's heart was still pounding, but now it was accompanied by a calmness he hadn't expected. Everything—every fleeting doubt, every old fear—seemed to melt away with the intensity of that moment.

They had crossed a line, but not in a way that felt like a mistake.

Gihun wasn't too old for this. He didn't feel out of place. He had lived his life with uncertainties, but as he looked into Young Il's eyes, a childish giggle escaped him—a sound so pure and carefree. Young Il joined in, their laughter echoing in the quiet night. But right now, Gihun didn't need answers or explanations. It was simple. It was right.

It always had been, to *be with Young Il* .

Chapter 18

"You kissed him?!"

Gihun stifled a yawn, his body still heavy with the weight of sleep from the night before. Junhee grabbed him, her hands trembling with excitement, her entire body practically vibrating as if she were about to burst. She bounced on her feet, a grin spreading across her face that was equal parts disbelief and pure joy.

He rubbed his neck, wincing as his fingers brushed over the tender spot. Before he could react, the younger girl's gaze dropped to it, her eyes widening in shock as she noticed the darkening mark already forming.

"You did not!" Junhee gasped, covering her mouth in utter disbelief. Gihun slapped a hand to his neck, desperately trying to shield the growing bruise, his face flushing a deep crimson. He shifted uncomfortably, his entire body tense, as if trying to shrink into himself.

Trying to look anywhere but at her, the memories from last night came rushing back in a tidal wave, each one more vivid and overwhelming than the last. Whether it was the Soju or the magnetic pull of the moment, things had spiraled faster than he'd expected— *way* faster. He could still feel the heat of the shorter man beneath him, his body half on top of him in a mess of tangled limbs and blurred intentions.

It was-

"You kissed him??!!!"

The voice thundered, gravelly and laced with disbelief. The words hit them like a jolt of electricity, freezing them in their tracks. They turned to face the source, and there stood Sangwoo—his sharp, put-together self completely unraveled. His usual composure was shattered; his hair a tangled mess, his shirt rumpled, and his entire presence almost unrecognizable.

Gihun's gaze shifted to the younger man's face, immediately locking onto the deep, dark bags under his eyes—evidence of a sleepless night. His features looked hollow, drained, as if exhaustion had settled into every line of his face. It was clear he hadn't slept a wink,

"What happened to you?" Gihun blurted before he could stop himself, the words slipping out with a rawness he hadn't expected. His hands twitched involuntarily, as if he wanted to reach out, to touch the other man's shoulder or check his pulse, anything to make sure he was okay.

However, Sangwoo didn't answer. He let out a long, tired sigh, as if the words had drained whatever energy was left. Without a glance back, he turned and walked toward the manager's desk, his steps slow and mechanical, as if he were moving through a fog.

"What's up with him?" Junhee muttered, her hand instinctively resting on her stomach as she watched Sangwoo, who was unloading his bag and typing furiously on his phone. The way he pounded the screen, tapping each key with so much force, it almost looked like he was trying to break it.

Gihun could only watch the man in front of him, his concern evident as his brows furrowed.

The concern only deepened as the day dragged on. Gihun couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on him —steady, unblinking, and focused. Sangwoo's gaze never wavered, even when Gihun finally looked up, locking eyes with him. There was no flicker of hesitation, no shift in expression—just that cold, unwavering stare, as if he didn't have the patience to break the tension, or perhaps didn't care to.

He had tried, really tried, to confront him directly instead of playing this maddening game of stares, hoping to piece together what the taller man was thinking.But every time Gihun attempted to say something, Sangwoo barely registered with him, his attention distant, almost dismissive.

When Sangwoo did speak, it was always something vague, fleeting, and before Gihun could even respond, he shut down again—his words clipped and closed off, like he was deliberately pushing Gihun away. The constant back-and-forth left Gihun seething, his frustration building with each failed attempt to break through.

So here he was, typing harder than he intended, each key slammed with more force than necessary, while glaring at Sangwoo before the man could even stare back at him. It felt like a silent standoff, as if they were both waiting for the other to break first, to look away, to speak—anything to end the tension hanging between them.

With each passing second, doubt and fear slowly crept in, clouding Gihun's thoughts as he tried to piece together Sangwoo's intentions. He *had* overheard their conversation and knew that Young Il worked here.

Was he planning to expose their relationship because they worked together? Or maybe—Gihun's heart twisted painfully at the thought— *maybe* Sangwoo hated the idea of him being with a man? The thought struck like a physical blow, and the ache in his chest spread, as the uncertainty consumed him.

Sangwoo wasn't like that, was he? Gihun couldn't shake the thought, the question looping in his mind like an endless echo. He had always believed Sangwoo to be different—reserved, maybe, but not cruel. Not someone who would judge him for something as personal as his relationship.

Yet, the silence between them, and the way Sangwoo had been acting lately, only deepened Gihun's doubts, reinforcing them in ways he didn't want to confront.

"Gihun…"

At the sound of his name, Gihun jumped, letting out a yelp as his knees hit the underside of the desk. Wincing, he quickly turned to face Sangwoo, who was standing there, holding up a stack of papers. The calmness in Sangwoo's expression only made Gihun's heart race faster.

"Can you..." Sangwoo paused for a moment, his expression shifting slightly, as if caught between something unsaid. He seemed to weigh his words before continuing, his voice steady but his eyes betraying a hint of something else."The CEO is hosting a meeting in Room 001 with the stakeholders. Can you take these papers up to him?"

Gihun blinked, momentarily stunned. Was this really why Sangwoo had been staring at him all day? For such a simple request?

He took the papers from Sangwoo, relief flooding through him. If this was all there was to it, then he'd been worrying for nothing. Sangwoo could be intense over the smallest things, and maybe he'd overthought the whole situation.

Gihun let out a quiet breath, trying to shake off the lingering unease. He nodded and offered Sangwoo a smile, but the younger man didn't return it, his face as unreadable as ever. Without another word, Gihun turned toward the elevator.

Just as Gihun stepped into the elevator, Sangwoo's voice stopped him, sharp and unexpected.

"I'm sorry,hyung."

The words hung in the air, suspended, as the elevator doors slowly closed, cutting off any chance for Gihun to respond. He bit his lip, confusion knitting his brows. *Sorry for what?* Making him bring papers to the CEO? The question didn't make sense, but as his mind drifted, he found himself wondering about the CEO instead.

What did he look like? Bald? Stern?His mind painted a harsh image—someone cold and unapproachable, probably as intimidating as he was powerful. *He probably looked as bad as he acted*

He let out a snicker, the anticipation building with each step as he made his way to Room 001.When he finally reached the door, he took a deep breath, preparing himself to face the elusive CEO.

But as the door swung open, he was met with an unexpected sight.

Young Il.

Gihun blinked as the stakeholders—or rather, the VIPs—turned their attention to him. His gaze flickered between their faces before landing back on Young Il, who had stilled at the front of the desk. His eyes widened in surprise, his expression shifting to one of almost mild shock.

"Sorry, uh—" Gihun quickly averted his gaze from Young Il, his eyes darting nervously around the room full of people. "I was supposed to bring this to the CEO. Uh, which one of you is the CEO?"

For a moment, there was complete silence. Then, suddenly, the entire room burst into laughter, the sound echoing off the walls.

"Are you serious?" One of the men with a wolf pin next to his name turned to Young Il, a wide grin spreading across his face. "Your employees don't even know you're the CEO, Inho?"

Inho?

Gihun's mind raced, trying to process the name. His thoughts felt scrambled as he tried to make sense of everything that had just happened. Shaking his head in confusion, an awkward smile tugged at his lips, the tension in his chest tightening with each passing second. "Uh, that's not Inho, that's Young Il," he said, his voice wavering slightly as he spoke.

His words felt out of place, as if he was trying to fix something that didn't quite add up. But when Gihun turned to look at Young Il, his stomach tightened. The man wasn't looking at him. Instead,

his face had gone deathly pale, a stark contrast to his usual calm composure. There was no sign of the easy confidence he often wore—just a stiff, almost unnatural stillness.

Gihun's eyes dropped to Young Il's hands, which were clenched into fists so tight that his knuckles were stark white. It was clear that he was holding himself back, fighting some kind of internal storm.

"What are you talking about?" Another man with a cat pin chimed in, chuckling lightly. "That *is* Inho."

He hadn't misheard, had he? The man he had known as Young Il—this calm, collected figure standing before him—was actually the CEO? The CEO, Inho? A knot twisted in his stomach as he looked at the man who had always been so composed, the one who seemed completely out of place in this new, much more authoritative role.

Gihun felt his face flush, the sting of embarrassment rising as the realization hit him like a punch to the gut. His eyes flicked to the watch *Young Il* — Inho—was wearing, the sleek, polished suit that had seemed so out of place before. The pieces clicked together with sickening clarity, and Gihun suddenly felt like he might throw up. His stomach churned, a cold sweat forming on his back as the truth sank in deeper.

Before he could fully process the rush of emotions, the shorter man stumbled toward him, grabbing his hand with a desperate urgency that caught Gihun off guard.

"This isn't how I wanted it," Inho muttered, his voice thick, his eyes glistening with something unsaid. But whatever it was—guilt, regret, or something else—Gihun couldn't bring himself to meet it.

He yanked his hand back, the papers slipping from his grip and scattering to the floor. The distance between them seemed to stretch impossibly wide, as everything that had been left unsaid and hidden hit him all at once. His chest tightened, the space between them feeling endless.

Trying to open his mouth, Gihun could only let out a strained breath, his hand instinctively covering his mouth as if to keep the words—no, the overwhelming wave of emotions—locked inside. It didn't make sense. Why would he lie to him? Why would he keep something like this hidden, leaving him in the dark for so long? Was it some kind of sick joke to pass the time? A cruel game played out of boredom?

The questions circled his mind, tightening around his chest, suffocating him. He wanted to scream, to demand answers, but all he could do was stand there, his mind racing and his heart pounding in his ears.

"Don't," Inho said quietly, almost pleadingly, as Gihun took a slow step back. The look in Inho's eyes— *that* look—made Gihun freeze. It wasn't anger. It wasn't frustration. It was something softer, something more vulnerable, that flash of hurt that flickered behind his gaze.

Gihun's breath hitched, and in that moment, something sharp and cold twisted deep inside him. He should have felt sympathy, but all he could feel now was a rush of anger—hot and quick—surging downward, pooling in his stomach, burning through the shock.

Hurt? The word echoed in his mind, and it stung. How dare Inho look at him like that? How dare he feel hurt when it was *Gihun* who had been kept in the dark, lied to, manipulated? He should be

the one who was hurt, not the one standing there with that soft expression of regret on his face. He didn't deserve this feeling of betrayal—not after -

"You think they're lovers?" someone chuckled, a teasing tone lacing their words.

"Fifty bucks says he's gonna get punched," another voice chimed in, the laughter barely contained as it spread through the room.

"Hah, you're cheap. Make it two hundred," someone else added, the challenge hanging in the air with a smirk.

The taunts rang out, echoing in Gihun's ears like a series of jabs, each one landing harder than the last.

Gihun took a deep breath, his hand trembling as he locked eyes with Inho. *He was better than this… He had to be. He was a better man...*

Turns out he *wasn't* .

Instead of holding back, he punched Inho, his hand landing right where, just a day before, he had carefully peppered kisses across. The spot that had once been touched with tenderness now burned with the weight of his *anger*.

Chapter 19

Gihun’s hands shook slightly as he tried to light his cigarette, the flame flickering in his unsteady grip. After a few failed attempts, the tip finally caught, and he inhaled deeply, the smoke filling his lungs. A long, tired sigh escaped him, his shoulders drooping as the exhaustion settled in. He rubbed his face with both hands, as if trying to scrub away the tiredness that had taken root inside him, but it wouldn’t go away.

There were three things he couldn’t ignore. Three truths he couldn’t shake, no matter how much he wanted to.

First—he had complained about his boss right in front of him. No, not just complained—he had vented, ranted, like a child, with no thought of the consequences. His words had been sharp, careless, a release of frustration that felt good in the moment but tasted sour now. He hadn’t even realized who he was talking to until it was too late.

Second—he had kissed him. *Kissed him*. That was the part that made his skin burn with embarrassment, the taste of it still lingering in his mind—sharp, undeniable, and all too vivid.

And worst of all... he’d punched him. Hard. His fist had landed with a force that surprised even him, as if his body had acted on its own, driven by some rush of anger and frustration he couldn’t control.

"I’m screwed," he muttered, taking another drag from his cigarette. His head dropped, shoulders heavy, as he sank onto the park bench across from the company building. The faint sound of cheering and clapping from the stakeholders still echoed in his ears, a cruel reminder of the scene he’d just fled.

Maybe he should just run. Get on a plane, leave Korea—disappear completely. Hell, maybe he could dye his hair pink. Or better yet, red. Bright red.

Gihun sighed, tossing the cigarette onto the ground and grinding it out with his foot. He didn’t know exactly how powerful Young-Inho was, but one thing was certain—he had more money than Gihun, and he could easily make his life a living hell if he wanted to.

More than he already had, of course.

“Choose one”

Gihun's gaze shifted to his left, and for a brief moment, his mind almost forgot the spiral of panic that had gripped him. But as his eyes landed on the scene unfolding before him, his confusion quickly took center stage, pushing everything else aside.

Standing a few feet away was a well-dressed man, his posture rigid and perfect as if he had just stepped out of a business meeting. His suit was impeccably tailored, his shoes polished to a shine. But it wasn't the man's appearance that made Gihun blink in disbelief—it was the scene itself. The man was smiling down at a homeless person, his expression one of warmth and concern, yet everything about the moment felt wrong.

In his left hand, he held a piece of bread, neatly wrapped and fresh, as if he'd just picked it up from an upscale bakery. In his other hand, though, was something utterly out of place: a lottery scratcher.The sight of the two items together, so mismatched, caught Gihun off guard, leaving him stunned.

Gihun watched as the homeless man took the scratcher from the businessman, only to groan in frustration as he lost. Without missing a beat, the businessman moved on, offering the same bizarre gesture to another person—then another, each interaction strangely mechanical, like he was following a script.

And then, without warning, the man stopped in front of Gihun, his smile as wide as ever, the same strange offer held out to him. A piece of bread in one hand, a lottery scratcher in the other. The businessman's expression remained fixed, almost unnervingly pleasant.

"Uh.." Gihun paused, eyeing the other man "I'm not homeless."

The other man's perpetual smile faltered just for a moment as he locked eyes with Gihun. His gaze shifted, inspecting him as though weighing every detail, every inch. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice almost uncertain. "I could've sworn..."

His words trailed off, leaving a strange pause hanging between them, as if he was trying to piece something together—or perhaps second-guessing himself. The smile, though still present, seemed less genuine now, more rehearsed.

This asshole!

Gihun nearly choked on a gasp, his brows furrowing in disbelief. Was this what all rich people were like? Out of their damn minds?

"Well, if you're sure…" The businessman's voice trailed off, and he started to turn away, ready to move on to his next bizarre interaction. But before he could take another step, Gihun's hand shot out, gripping his arm with surprising force.

The businessman froze, his eyes flicking down to Gihun's hand, then up to his face, his smile faltering. Gihun's expression was anything but light—his features hard, his gaze fixed and intense.

He was rich, just like Inho. Maybe, just maybe, he could offer some kind of answer, help him make sense of all the mess he was in.

"By any chance…" Gihun swallowed hard, his throat dry, as the question slowly took shape in his mind. His voice came out uneven, but he forced it to stay steady. "Do you think I'm good looking?"

His face was so serious that it almost overshadowed the absurdity of what he had just asked. The words hung in the air, strange and out of place, but he could feel the heat creeping up his neck. The ridiculousness of it all gnawed at him, yet a strange part of him couldn't help but wonder.

It made sense, right? Why Inho had toyed with him, kissed him without a second thought, his actions too smooth to be anything but calculated. Maybe it wasn't just about power or control. Maybe Gihun had one of those faces—something about him that bosses couldn't resist. The kind that made them lean in a little too close, the kind they could use for a moment of pleasure and then discard once they were done, like some character out of a K-drama.

Sure, he wasn't some delicate, pretty young woman, the kind of face you'd expect to see in a K-drama romance. But maybe—just maybe—Inho had a thing for slightly older men?

"Wha—" The other man's hands tightened around the items, crumpling the bread and lottery scratcher in a way that looked almost violent. Before he could even process what was happening, Gihun spoke up again, his voice cutting through the air, sharp and unrelenting.

"Can you believe it?" Gihun ranted, his grip still tight on the younger man, his words tumbling out in a rush. "That he-Inho would do this to me? He lied, told me he was just a coworker too! Okay, fine, maybe he didn't *lie* —I just assumed—but still, he lied about his name! The intention was there! Was his only goal to make a fool of me? What the hell is wrong with him and that stupid, handsome face of his? Does he think I'm easy or something—"

A hand landed firmly on Gihun's shoulder, cutting his rant short. He snapped his head up, meeting the businessman's gaze, but the smile that met him now was tight—forced, even. The man opened his mouth, as if to offer some much-needed wisdom, but instead, his lips twisted into that same impassive grin as he said,

"I'm not your therapist, and frankly, I don't care."

Gihun gawked, the words hitting him harder than he expected. His mind stumbled to process the coldness of the businessman's response. The businessman's hand slid off Gihun's shoulder with casual indifference, the gesture so smooth it almost seemed rehearsed. Without a hint of hesitation, he gently but firmly pried Gihun's fingers from his arm, his movements precise, as if he had done this a thousand times.

"Maybe you should tell HR?" another voice chimed in. Both men turned to the left, where the speaker sat in another seat, his mouth full of food as he casually looked at them from where he was.

Gihun processed the suggestion, momentarily caught off guard. Tell HR? It wasn't the worst idea. It might stop him from making a run for it—and if he didn't get fired, that would be a win.

Just as he was about to respond, the businessman turned back to him, the corner of his mouth twitching with a hint of amusement.

"Well, looks like it's your lucky day," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm as he leaned in slightly, his smile growing more smug. "I'm the head of HR. And once again… I don't care."

The other man casually pulled out his badge, holding it up in front of Gihun with an almost mocking air. Gihun's eyes darted to it, and there it was— *The Salesman, HR, Squid Enterprise.*

Gihun blinked, his confusion deepening. "Your name is *The Salesman* ?" He couldn't help the incredulous tone that slipped into his voice.

The Salesman shrugged indifferently, tucking his badge back into his pocket with a casual flick of his wrist. As he turned to walk off, he muttered, "What a fucking weirdo."

At the exact same moment, Gihun echoed the same words, “What a fucking weirdo.”

Gihun’s eyes shot up, his breath catching as he saw the Salesman halt, turning back with a flicker of surprise on his face—as if he hadn’t just called Gihun the same thing. The brief moment of shock flashed across his features before he quickly masked it, his expression slipping back into that familiar smile.

“Look, maybe you should just make up with him,” the other man said, straightening his suit as he spoke, his tone almost dismissive. “You were fine when you didn’t know he was your boss, right? So what’s so different now? After that, you can stop moping around like some lost puppy.”

Then, with those final words, he turned to walk away again, slipping back into his own world as if the conversation had been nothing more than a passing inconvenience—just another moment he’d easily forgotten.

But Gihun didn’t let it go. He let the words stew for a moment, his frustration building up until he scoffed. *What did he know anyway?*

He would never make up with that asshole. Never. The thought alone sent a cold, uncomfortable chill through his body, but he pushed it down, refusing to let it bother him any more than it already had.

Chapter 20

It had been weeks since the truth had shattered everything—Young Il, the kind, compassionate man Gihun had believed in, was nothing more than Inho, the ruthless CEO in disguise. The revelation felt like a punch to the gut, one that still hadn't stopped winding its way through Gihun's chest.

Every time he thought about it, the ache in his heart grew heavier, deeper. He had expected his anger to intensify, to burn until there was nothing left but rage. But instead, it had slowly fizzled out, replaced by something quieter, more difficult to bear. Disappointment. Sadness. A dull, gnawing sorrow that settled in his chest, colder and more suffocating than any fury could have been.

With a sigh, he stood up, making the final adjustments to his report before sending it off to Sangwoo. It had become a routine—work, then wait. Always waiting for the inevitable.

Waiting for the moment when everything would come crashing down. When the company would finally make an example of him. Maybe they'd fire him. Maybe they'd press charges for the scene he'd caused when he'd punched Inho, right in front of so many witnesses.

And the worst part was, he didn't feel fear. It was something deeper, something more twisted, something he couldn't quite shake. A feeling he tried to bury, to convince himself wasn't there. But deep down, part of him missed Inho. It wasn't just the anger, the betrayal—it was something else, something he couldn't ignore. A longing he couldn't get rid of, no matter how hard he tried.

"Gihun."

The familiar voice made Gihun stiffen as he turned, coat in hand and pushing his chair back into the desk, ready to leave.His gaze moved from the flowers Inho was holding, the bruise still glaringly visible from the punch, to the bag in his other hand, before finally settling on Inho, who appeared almost uncertain of himself.

"What are you doing here?" The taller man's voice was calm, but inside, his heart thudded—was it anger? Or something else? Maybe even a strange kind of happiness that Inho was here?

He wasn't sure, but whatever it was, he refused to acknowledge it. He didn't step toward Inho, keeping his distance as he slowly buttoned up his coat, each motion a quiet barrier between them.

"Look, I—" Inho's voice faltered as he swallowed, then hesitated before extending the bag toward Gihun, guilt etched across his face. For a moment, Gihun's instinct was to refuse, to push him away, but the look in Inho's eyes—almost desperate, almost pleading—made him pause. His fingers moved before he could stop them, reaching for the bag and opening it slowly, as if unsure of what he would find inside.

There, nestled in the box, was a bracelet—each gem fully encrusted and gleaming under the light.

Gihun stared at it, mesmerized by how each stone sparkled with an almost haunting brilliance.

It's…

Gihun smiled faintly as he closed the box with a soft click. His gaze flickered up, catching the brief flash of relief that softened Inho's expression, the tension in his shoulders easing. But he didn't let it linger. Instead, he shifted his attention to the girl that sat next to him, lifting the box toward her with a casual tilt of his head.

"Hey. You want this?"

The girl's eyes widened, her fingers freezing mid-type as she stared at Gihun, searching his face for any sign that he was joking, any hint of sarcasm. But there was nothing—nothing but the steady calm of his expression, the subtle curve of his lips as he gently set the box down on her desk. Without saying a word, he turned to grab his bag, his movements smooth, almost practiced.

He attempted to brush past Inho, deliberately avoiding his gaze, refusing to give him the satisfaction of an exchange. But just as he neared the eleavtor door, Inho's hand shot out, firm and unyielding. His fingers wrapped around Gihun's wrist with a sudden force that stopped him dead in his tracks.

"What…" Inho hesitated, his voice thick with frustration as he looked at Gihun. A deep sigh escaped him, and the lines of exhaustion became more apparent on his face. "I should've told you earlier, I know that now. But I just—" He stopped, unable to finish, the words swallowed by the regret that clouded his expression.

However, Gihun only scoffed, the familiar surge of anger bubbling up again, and yanked his arm free from Inho's grip. "You *should* have told me," he said, voice tight. He paused, glaring before adding, "And don't think you can buy your way out of this with your blood money. It's not going to work."

Ok, *'blood money'* was a bit of an exaggeration, but it was close enough.

Gihun felt a headache brewing, the frustration pressing down on him. He was done, completely drained, and didn't want to waste another second on this conversation. With a frustrated sigh, he turned sharply and stomped toward the elevator, slamming the button for the ground floor.As the doors slid close, he found himself stealing one last look at Inho's face—his eyes filled with hurt and regret, a broken look that made Gihun feel a wave of guilt.

But even though he didn't step forward to comfort him, the guilt only grew deeper with every step he took. It stayed with him as he rode the bus, a persistent ache that didn't fade, no matter how slowly the minutes passed.

"Sorry, excuse me, young man, I need to get off here."

Gihun's gaze dropped, a wave of surprise flickering across his face as he saw an older woman standing there, struggling to balance three heavy bags. The weight of them seemed to pull her down, yet she stood there, waiting quietly for him to move aside so she could make her way to the door.

"Ah—let me," Gihun hesitated for a brief moment, as if weighing the decision, before gently taking the heavy bags from the older woman's hands. She looked up at him, her eyes widening in surprise.

His smile was small but genuine as he shifted the bags in his arms. “ Let me help you with these,”

He offered his arm to her, and the older woman’s lips curled into a grin, her face lighting up with appreciation. She patted his arm with a gentle chuckle, clearly taken aback by his offer, before happily linking her arm with his as he guided her through the crowded bus aisle.

As they stepped off the bus and onto the cool pavement, Gihun glanced down at her, his smile soft but sincere.

“Where do you live? I’ll drop you off,” he offered, his voice carrying a warmth.

“Such a polite young man,” the old woman chuckled, her voice filled with a light, genuine amusement as she gently tugged him in the direction of her home. Her steps were slow but purposeful, and there was an undeniable spark in her,a quiet energy.

As they walked, the noise of the city seemed to fade away, the constant hum of traffic and the chatter of pedestrians melting into the background. The rhythmic sound of their footsteps on the pavement became a steady, almost soothing backdrop, the kind of sound that made everything else feel distant. The air between them grew lighter as the conversation flowed effortlessly. She asked about his age, where he lived, and what kind of work he did—each question flowing one after the other, each filled with a gentle curiosity,

Gihun answered each question without thinking too much, his responses coming naturally

But as they neared her apartment door, she suddenly perked up, her expression shifting as she asked Gihun a question that nearly made him drop the bags onto the floor.

“Are you by any chance married?” she asked, her voice casual as she knocked on the door. “I didn’t mean to pry, but you looked like you had your heart broken. I’ve seen that kind of expression before, but never one so deep. It must’ve been someone you cared for a lot.”

The taller man flushed at the question, his mouth opening instinctively to deny it. But no matter how hard he tried, the words wouldn’t come. He couldn’t bring himself to lie, and the truth of her observation settled into him, heavy and undeniable.

“Mom, did you go grocery shopping again? I told you to wait for—YOU?!”

Gihun’s head snapped up at the sound of the voice, his eyes locking onto Junho’s shocked expression. The younger man stood there, out of uniform, wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts, the scene suddenly feeling all too familiar.

“Stop being rude, Junho,” Junho’s mother chided, her tone firm as she shot him a disapproving look. Then, turning to Gihun, her expression softened, and she offered him a warm smile, motioning for him to come inside. “This kind man helped me get home. Would you help him settle down, Junho?”

“Uh—I…” Gihun started to protest, but before he could get the words out, Junho’s mother shot him a disapproving smile. Her gaze was firm but gentle, and with a quick, decisive motion, she guided him inside.

In the living room, Gihun stood frozen for a moment, then placed the bags down gently, as if the simple action required more effort than he could muster. Junho, without a word, silently slid a pair

of slippers toward him, his gaze never once meeting Gihun's. The air between them felt thick, heavy with something unsaid, as Junho focused on anything but the older man.

As Junho's mother disappeared into her room, the silence stretched uncomfortably, leaving Gihun to awkwardly slip on the slippers, his discomfort growing as he glanced around the room in an attempt to distract himself.

However, when his eyes landed on a picture on the shelf, Gihun froze. The image showed three figures, and as his gaze flicked from the photo to Junho, then back again, he saw Junho tense up, his eyes squeezed shut, arms crossed tightly, lips pressed into a thin, rigid line.

Gihun paused, the realization striking him so suddenly that he almost choked on his words.

"Inho… he's—"

Junho nodded, his expression tense, jaw clenched, allowing Gihun to gather his thoughts and finish his words.

Gihun stared at him, his face blank as the truth crashed down on him.

"You're Inho's husband?? I'm the side piece?!!!"

"Yes—WAIT, WHAT?" Junho's eyes snapped open, as if the words had struck him harder than anything else. His whole body stiffened, a flash of confusion and disbelief crossing his face. "NO! He's my brother!"

After a brief moment of silence following Junho's outburst, Gihun scratched his cheek, a sheepish smile spreading across his face as the realization of his own stupidity hit him. "Oh…" he said, before his expression shifted to one of genuine confusion. "BROTHER?? So, you knew he's my boss and you didn't say anything??" His voice was tinged with frustration now, his eyes locked on Junho, searching for any hint of explanation.

Junho sighed deeply, tilting his head back as he muttered under his breath something close to, "Never get involved in my brother's love affairs… or anyone else's for that matter."

His tone was a blend of resignation and annoyance, as if he'd long since made peace with the idea but knew deep down it was a rule he could never quite follow through on.

"Look," Junho began, rubbing his temples, clearly fed up with the chaos of emotions and misunderstandings. "He made me promise to keep my mouth shut until he was ready to tell you. Something about making sure you two got married first or whatever… I kinda zoned out in the middle of his rambling about his 'master plan.'"

"Married???" Gihun spluttered, the thought hitting him like a jolt, a surge of something rising in his chest that he quickly shoved down. "It's not like I'm ever going to talk to him again—he's an asshole. I can't believe he'd lie to me like that."

"Yup, he is an asshole." To his surprise, Junho nodded vigorously, agreeing almost too quickly, as if the words came as a natural reaction. It was as if he'd been waiting to say it, his expression hardening as he spoke. " A complete manipulative asshole."

“What—?” Gihun was taken aback, still trying to process the unexpected admission. He stood there, speechless, as Junho continued on without missing a beat.

“Look, I’m not saying you should forgive him,” Junho began, his tone shifting slightly, as if carefully choosing his words. “But he does… You should’ve seen how happy he was whenever he visited us after he met you. And how torn up he was when you found out.”

He frowned, clearly struggling with the next part, as if it was hard for him to say.“The last time I saw him show this much genuine emotion was when he shot me in the shoulder by accident. And the other time… was when his wife—” Junho trailed off, his voice faltering, as if the memory was too much to put into words.

“I…..he shot you?!!!”

Junho let out a dry chuckle, trying to lighten the mood, but his eyes betrayed a mix of disbelief and nostalgia. “Yeah, he was really excited when he first joined the police force. We thought the safety was on, and… well, guess it wasn’t. Shot me right in the shoulder. He felt terrible, but it was an accident.” He paused, blinking as a thought seemed to hit him. “Wait—he didn’t tell you he was in the *police force* before he became CEO of Squid Enterprises?

One look at Gihun’s expression was all Junho needed. He groaned, cursing under his breath. “Right, of course he didn’t. Why does he always think keeping secrets from people is going to make them happy?” Junho shook his head, as if irritated by the pattern of his brother’s behavior. He ran a hand through his hair, letting out a breath.

“You have every right to despise what he did,” Junho said, his tone more resolute now. “If you hate him and never want to see him again, I’ll find a way to help you get another job or transfer to a different office. Hell, if you want to steal half of his money and make a run for it, I’ll support you.” Junho’s words were solid, no hesitation in them. “What he did was beyond messed up, and I’m sorry you got caught in the middle of it.”

For a moment, Gihun felt a strange impulse to either laugh or break down, the flood of new information too much to handle. He took a step back, unsure of what to do next. "I... I need to go," he said, his voice shaky, as if the simple act of speaking was a struggle.

Junho nodded, his gaze softening with understanding as he watched Gihun’s movements become hurried. Gihun slipped out of the slippers and quickly tied the laces, not bothering to adjust them properly before grabbing his bag from the floor. He opened the door, the sound of it creaking a sharp contrast to the silence that hung between them.

As Gihun stepped into the hallway, Junho’s voice called out, carrying a calm sincerity. “Just think about it, okay? He does have… whatever the closest thing to love is for you. You might not feel the same, but you need to know that he does, at least.”

However, Gihun didn’t answer, slamming the door behind him as he left.

And if, when he got home, he couldn’t bring himself to throw away the plush Inho had won for him at the festival, with Junho’s words swirling in his mind, and ended up clutching it to sleep, who was there to *judge* him?

Chapter 21

He wasn't moping. Definitely not. Gihun sat there, staring at his computer screen, but the longer he did, the more everything around him seemed to fade. His eyes grew heavier, the words on the screen starting to blur into a mess of meaningless lines. He could still hear Junho's words echoing in the back of his mind, repeating over and over, each one twisting his thoughts further. The more he tried to push them away, the louder they grew, making his head spin as if they were wrapping around him, pulling him deeper into uncertainty.

And Inho actually giving them some distance didn't help at all. He had respected Gihun's wishes, staying away and keeping his promise for weeks, but a part of him wished he hadn't. The distance only seemed to amplify everything—the unspoken words, the feeling that something was slipping further away, leaving him... lost

But he didn't want to be the one to make the first move, too stubborn to give in. After all, at the end of the day, he had already let him in once—and look where that had gotten him.

"Moping again?" Junhee teased, a grin flickering on her face as she watched Gihun, but her expression faltered when she saw the sadness in his eyes. He didn't even try to hide it, and it seems to hit her harder than she expected. Her voice softened, the teasing now gone. "It's that bad, huh?"

Gihun watched as Junhee paused, her gaze studying his face for a moment before she reached into her pocket. With a quick motion, she pulled something out and placed it in his hand, gently closing his fingers around it. He looked down, his eyebrows rising in confusion as he took in the two pieces of paper. Both were adorned with the bold, eye-catching phrase "50% Off Couples Only!" and featured a playful cat wrapping its tail around the percentage sign. The paper itself was a garish pink, with swirls and colors so vibrant it looked like a rainbow had exploded across it.

"There's this café I've been dying to try, but it's on the pricier side," Junhee said thoughtfully, tapping her chin before she patted Gihun's head, her fingers brushing through his hair as she hummed at its softness. "They're running a 50% off deal today. Sangwoo told me he was getting tired of seeing you moping around all day, so he asked me to take you out for lunch today. So..."

"But…" Gihun's eyes fixed on the words *Couple* printed boldly on the paper, the implication sinking in. "This is for couples only."

Junhee stopped mid-pat, her hand lingering on his head as she met his gaze. A slow, teasing smile spread across her face. "So?" she said, her voice dropping into a playful challenge. "Guess we'll just have to fake it, won't we?"

Gihun's eyes widened at her suggestion, his head shaking instinctively in refusal. The idea of pretending to be in a couple was the last thing he wanted.One person—even if just thinking about that person made him want to bury his face in his hands—already assuming he was in a relationship with her, or worse, mistaking her for his wife *once* , was more than enough to make him shut the idea down completely.

The younger girl's lips twitched, quivering as if fighting back the urge to say something, her eyes gleaming with that unmistakable look.

Oh shit—

Gihun could feel those puppy eyes before she even spoke, the kind that had the power to wear down any resistance. He knew what was coming, and despite every part of him wanting to stand firm, he could already sense himself breaking.

“Ok!” Gihun shot to his feet, a sense of defeat washing over him. “I get it! I’ll go!”

Junhee’s expression lit up in an instant, her grin spreading wide as she pulled him into a quick, unexpected hug. Before he could react, she shoved his coat into his arms, her movements swift and sure. “You go ahead first,” she said, her voice practically singing with anticipation. “I just need to check something.”

And just like that, Gihun found himself standing outside *Glass Ceiling Cafe* , coupons shoved awkwardly into his coat pocket. As he peered through the glass window, a strange shiver ran down his spine. The scene inside was something else—mostly customers in their mid-20s gathered in clusters, their voices raised in an uncoordinated chorus, as a server dressed in a maid costume serenaded them while delivering an omelette.

Truthfully, he could almost see the appeal of it—the carefree energy, the bright colors, the whole over-the-top vibe. But then, he couldn’t help but imagine the scene: a middle-aged man like him walking through the door, surrounded by those way younger than him, singing along as if he belonged there. What would they think?The very thought made him sweat. He could already picture the awkward stares, the whispered comments behind his back….. It was almost enough to make him reconsider.

“Gihun?”

Gihun turned to his left, his eyes widening as he saw the man standing there. That was it. If he’d been on the verge of running before, now it felt like the only choice. His body stiffened, a surge of panic crawling up his spine. He stood frozen, caught off guard, unsure whether to stay or make a quick escape.

“Inho??!!” Gihun gasped, his voice catching in his throat as he stared at the shorter man, who looked just as stunned as he felt. “What—what are you doing here?”

Inho tilted his head slightly, a frown tugging at the corner of his mouth as he looked between the café and Gihun. “Junhee said she needed a plus one to get the couples discount,” he said slowly, his tone uncertain.

Gihun stared at Inho, his eyes widening as the words sank in.

Couples discount-

A surge of realization hit him all at once. With a sharp intake of breath, he pulled out his phone, his fingers trembling as he messaged Junhee. *Where are you?* He quickly hit send, praying she hadn't done what he feared.

His phone buzzed again, and he quickly read the new message from Junhee. *Sorry, can't make it! Enjoy!*

Gihun stared at the screen, reading the words over and over, his heart pounding harder with each cycle. He hoped, somehow, he had misread it, that there was some mistake. But no, the message was clear.

The anxiety that followed only intensified as he glanced back at Inho, the shorter man still standing there, waiting for some sort of response.

"I'm guessing she can't make it?" Inho asked, his lips curling into a soft, almost too calm smile as he watched Gihun's panic-stricken face. "Do you still want to go in together? We can't let those coupons go to waste, right?"

His voice was smooth, almost *too* reasonable, as if he'd forgotten that Inho was the one running a multimillion-dollar empire and could easily buy out the whole café without a second thought.

But… Gihun sighed, slipping his phone back into his pocket. He didn't have the luxury of that kind of wealth—and besides, he'd already wasted a bus fare getting here. The least he could do was get something to eat, right? He glanced at Inho, whose smile remained steady and unbothered, as if the awkwardness didn't even register for him… even though he had to pretend to be a couple with *him* , of all people.

"Fine," Gihun muttered, pushing past Inho as he stepped into the café, pulling out his coupon to show the server. He could feel Inho right behind him, his presence a steady weight on his back.

Before the server could guide them any further, Gihun raised two fingers, his tone even but resolute. "Two tables, please."

The server paused, her gaze shifting between Gihun's raised fingers and Inho, a flicker of confusion crossing her face before she offered an awkward smile. "Sorry, I thought you were using the couples discount?"

"We're divorced," Gihun replied quickly, his words sharp and matter-of-fact.

"Right…" the server mumbled, clutching the menu tightly in her hands, her fingers tightening around the paper as if it were the only thing holding her together. "Yeah, can't do that... the discount's only for couples who are still together and have to sit at one table."

At her words, Gihun let out a soft sigh, barely audible but full of resignation.He'd at least tried, but in the end, a discount was a discount—no matter who he was with. With a quiet grunt, he nodded and followed the server toward a seat near the corner, the soft shuffle of their footsteps the only sound breaking the uneasy stillness.

He slid into the seat, doing his best to ignore the persistent feeling of Inho's gaze on him. Across the table, Inho sat with that same, almost irritatingly calm expression. The smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth never wavered, as if he found this situation amusing—or maybe he just enjoyed watching Gihun squirm.

Under the dim light, Gihun couldn't help but notice the fading bruise on Inho's face, still visible despite the days that had passed. The sight made him wince involuntarily. He didn't regret expressing his anger—Inho had deserved it. But the way he'd gone about it… that part lingered with him.

"Welcome to Glass Ceiling Café!" The server in the maid outfit greeted them cheerfully, her bell-choker jingling with every step. She and her colleague quickly approached Inho, placing a heart-shaped headband on his head with a flourish. Gihun nearly choked on his own breath, trying to stifle the laughter bubbling up inside him. The sight of Inho—stoic as ever, now wearing a heart-shaped headband—was absurdly funny.

But as Gihun tried to compose himself, the second server slipped a pair of bunny ears onto his own head. His jaw dropped for a moment, the shock of it hitting him first. Then, he met Inho's calm gaze, which didn't even flicker.

"Uh, do we really have to wear—"

Before Gihun could finish, the server's cheerful smile evaporated instantly. Her hand clenched the pen so tightly it creaked, and with the other, she gripped the notepad, crushing it with surprising force. The change in her demeanor was immediate and sharp, making Gihun shut his mouth before he could even get another word out.

"Do you want the couple discount or not?" Her voice was cold now, almost demanding, as she glared at him, the air suddenly tense between them.

Gihun quickly averted his gaze, nodding frantically, trying to pretend this whole thing wasn't happening. The server's signature smile returned, almost too bright, as she handed both of them menus and a small bell.

"Take your time looking over the menu, sirs. Just ring this bell when you're ready to order," she said, her tone cheerful. With a final, almost exaggerated jingle of her bell, she walked off, her steps echoing through the café as the bell chimed with each movement.

"It looks good on you," Inho said, his voice light as he looked at Gihun, who was fiddling with the bunny headband. His eyes gleamed with a mix of amusement and something else—like he knew exactly how ridiculous they both looked, but didn't mind.

After a pause, Gihun ignored Inho's comment, focusing on the menu in front of him, determined to just order, eat, and leave. He wanted to get out of here before things got any more uncomfortable.

He could still feel the shorter man's heated gaze on him, piercing through the air between them, until Gihun couldn't take it anymore.

"Can you stop looking at me like that?" he snapped, his voice edged with frustration.

But the other man didn't even flinch, his eyes still locked on Gihun, as though he had all the time in the world to dissect him. "Like what?"

Gihun's fingers tightened around the edge of his menu, the paper crinkling under his grip. "Like nothing happened."

Inho sighed, his lips falling into a thin line, his eyes darkening as if they were both on the verge of something neither of them wanted. "Then what are we supposed to do now, Gihun? Can't you just pretend, for once, that it's okay?"

Pretend? Gihun's laugh was short, bitter, and full of disbelief. He stood up abruptly, the chair scraping against the floor. His voice rose, raw with frustration. "Like you did this whole time?"

Inho narrowed his eyes, standing up sharply and pushing his chair back with a force that rattled the table. His jaw tightened as he stared at Gihun, his frustration rising. "That's not fair—I—"

"Not fair?" Gihun interrupted, his voice low and tight, his anger simmering just below the surface. He leaned forward, his eyes locking onto Inho's. "What, like *you* were the one who was lied to?"

His words came out like a snap, a whip of raw emotion. "Why did you do it, Inho? You could've told me anytime, but you kept lying to my face, playing like everything was fine, smiling at my friends, pretending everything was normal— *despite knowing* you screwed them over. You knew exactly what you were doing, and yet you kept *going* . So tell me—what more do you want to do? What more *can* you do?"

Gihun's fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles going white. The blood pounded in his ears, drowning out everything else, as he forced himself to ignore the stares he could feel pressing into them.

They locked eyes, the silence stretching on as if time itself had paused. Gihun's heart hammered in his chest, each beat sharp, his breath uneven. He could feel the heat in his cheeks, the tension building between them. He didn't want to lean in closer, but his body moved before his mind could catch up.

"I hate you," he muttered, the words bitter on his tongue, thick with all the frustration he couldn't hide anymore.

Inho didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. Instead, a slow smile tugged at the corner of his lips, one that sent a wave of irritation through Gihun. Inho leaned in, just a fraction closer, his breath brushing against Gihun's skin as he whispered, "I know."

Without thinking, Gihun moved, closing the distance between them, every part of him pulled toward Inho like gravity. The moment their lips met, it was like a sudden storm—violent and overwhelming. The kiss wasn't gentle. It was a clash of teeth, a rush of heat, and the kind of

pressure that left no room for doubt. There was no sweetness to it, no lingering tenderness. Just an immediate, raw intensity that took Gihun's breath away, made his pulse spike, and sent a jolt through his entire body.

Before he could even register what was happening, Inho's fingers were tangled in his hair, tugging him closer with a quiet insistence, his hand firm. A soft desperate sound escaped from Inho, half a sigh, half a breath.

Gihun could hear the server's frantic voice, shouting at them to stop, but it felt distant, almost as if it didn't matter. He didn't pull away. Instead, he leaned in closer, deepening the kiss, shutting out everything else—just the sensation, the heat, the undeniable pull between them. The server's calls faded into the background, and the sound of gasps from nearby tables became a blur, irrelevant in that moment.

When they finally pulled apart, Gihun's breath was ragged, his mind still racing to catch up with what had just happened. He caught a glimpse of Inho, his eyes half-lidded, still lost in the aftermath of their kiss. But Gihun didn't allow the silence to settle. His hand shot out, grabbing Inho's tie, yanking him closer, the sudden movement sharp with frustration.

"This—" Gihun's voice caught for a second, and then he tugged at the tie again, his anger bubbling to the surface. "You can't lie to me anymore."

Inho's response was a slow nod,his grin almost dazed.

"And you're going to apologize to my friends for what you've done."

That got Inho's attention. His brows furrowed, eyes sharpening.

"Yes, even Sangwoo," Gihun sighed. "I don't know what you did to him, but for him to harbor that much hatred toward you, you must've crossed a line."

He watched as Inho gave a more reluctant, but resigned, nod.

"And give Junhee a raise—she deserves it more than anyone... and I always sleep on the left side of the bed!"

Ok.Maybe he shouldn't have thrown in that last part, and he knew he was pushing it—Inho was still his boss, kiss or not—but in that moment, it felt like he *should* have some say in this, especially after everything Inho had put him through. His mind raced, searching for anything else he needed to say, anything he might've forgotten.

Slowly, he turned to the server, who was standing frozen, her mouth hanging open in shock. With a lopsided, sheepish grin, he asked, "So... do we still get the 50% discount?"

Inho snorted before yanking Gihun into another kiss, paying no mind to the cheers and catcalls from nearby tables or the server muttering under her breath about *crazy old men* and wanting to *quit* .

Note

And there you have it!

The end of *Lunch Break Confession* (base story).

Thank you so much for reading my silly little fanfiction and for all the amazing support. I just wanted to apologize for not responding to comments—this whole thing started on a whim, right when my stress over internships was at its peak (kind of ironic, tho….Avoiding stress about corporate jobs by writing about corporate job romance… or toxic romance?). Anyway, I just

powered through this fic until I finally reached the end. But really, thank you from the bottom of my heart for every kudo and comment. I read every single one, and they always make my day.

But before I wrap things up, I wanted to share a couple of fun facts that didn't make it into the story:

- When Sangwoo told Gihun to hand up the paper, it didn't actually have any important details. It was just a bunch of articles about the top 10 ways to betray your friends (so yeah, he had the whole thing planned out from the start).
- And Inho's "master plan"? Pretty simple—he was just hoping that, after they got married, Gihun would stick around because, well, Inho had a big wallet and an even bigger… *cough*

But hey, the plan worked because…

You are cordially invited to their wedding!

And there will be **3 extra stories** included:

- Corporate Wedding
- Corporate Babies
- Corporate Halloween

I hope to see you there!

(And I know my writing doesn't always translate perfectly, so if anything's confusing or unclear, feel free to ask! I'd be happy to clarify anything for you.)

Extra: Corporate Wedding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Panicking, his breath shallow as he bent over the trashcan, heaving. His white suit was likely ruined, the fabric stained with sweat, but the thought barely registered. Here he was, on the brink of his wedding day, just ten minutes before the vows, lying on the floor as panic consumed him.

He had been over the moon when Inho got down on one knee to propose during their two-year anniversary, at that exclusive restaurant Inho had reserved just for them. The night felt magical—romantic, intimate, and everything Gihun had imagined. Although there had been a few awkward moments—like when Gihun had pulled out a note that said "I love you" from a piece of chocolate cake and, in his nervousness, had accidentally responded to the cake instead of Inho—he had ultimately replied with a resolute "yes" to the proposal.

But now, just moments before the vows, the reality of what was about to happen hit him like a wave—he was about to make a decision that would shape the rest of his life, and he wasn't sure he was ready.

"It's going to be okay, Dad," his daughter, Ga-Yeong, said softly, kneeling beside him and gently patting his back as she tried to soothe his nausea. "Breathe."

Gihun lifted his head slightly, his eyes meeting hers. He attempted a smile, but it twisted into a grimace instead. Years of silence had convinced him that she no longer wanted him in her life. When Inho had encouraged him to reach out, Gihun had gripped Inho's hand with one of his, the other clutching the phone so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

Seconds turned into minutes, and just as he was about to give up—resigned to the thought that she would never want to speak to him again—she finally answered. Hearing her call him "Dad" was like the world shifting beneath his feet, and for a moment, it nearly shattered him.

He was deeply grateful to Inho, for everything—from the smallest gestures to the biggest acts of support. Inho had found his daughter's number, encouraged him to reach out, and had always been there when he needed him most. Gi-hun could say, without hesitation, that he loved Inho. Yet, despite all of that, the idea of marrying him made him... afraid. Despite all that Inho had done, despite the love he felt, that question echoed in his mind, leaving him unsettled and unsure.

"What happened?" Junhee asked, crouching beside Ga-Yeong, her gaze fixed on Gi-hun with a mixture of concern and urgency. "Should I tell Inho and the others to hold off for a few more minutes?"

"I—" Gi-hun wheezed, struggling to sit up, his hand running through his disheveled hair as he curled in on himself, trying to pull away from the overwhelming pressure of the moment. "I can't

do this, Junhee, I—I just—”

His voice trailed off, his mind racing, until suddenly, his eyes lit up with a frantic thought. “Wait... maybe I can just run away. Yeah! I’ll take the flight, dye my hair, start over somewhere new—”

“The same plan you had when you found out your soon-to-be husband was the CEO?” Junhee didn’t flinch. Her gaze was steady, unwavering as she looked at him, her tone dry and cutting. But then, her expression slowly shifted, as if something was dawning on her. Without a word, she stood up, her movements deliberate as she walked over to his bag, rummaging through it before he could stop her.

She paused, her fingers digging through the bag before she pulled out a carton of red hair dye and a plane ticket. She stared at him, incredulous. “Seriously?!! You brought your emergency escape bag to your wedding?”

“Just in case, okay?!” Gihun muttered, his voice barely above a whisper, the heat of embarrassment rushing to his face as he shrank under her judgmental gaze. His neck flushed a deep red, and he shifted uneasily, trying to brush it off. “Well… it’s an emergency bag for a reason…”

“Dad, why are you so scared?” Ga-Yeong asked, taking his hands in hers, her eyes locked onto his with an intensity that made his heart tighten. Her lips pressed into a thin line, brows furrowed with concern. “Did you… not want this? It’s okay if you—”

“No!” Gi-hun blurted out, his voice rising with a sharpness that surprised even him. He hadn't meant to snap, but the question hit harder than he expected. His mind flashed back to the days leading up to the wedding—the way he counted down the hours with excitement, the laughter shared with Inho as they tried cake after cake, unable to stop until they were both stuffed, the heated debates over the flowers, before they finally settled on a mismatched arrangement that somehow felt perfect. It wasn’t that he didn’t want this… it was just—

“Are you serious Gihun?”

Gi-hun looked up to see Sangwoo striding toward him, his presence commanding the room. Sae-Byeok stood by the door, arms crossed, watching with a quiet intensity, while Ali, clearly uneasy, darted nervous glances between Gihun and Sangwoo.

The taller man crouched down to Gihun's level, adjusting his glasses with a cold precision before locking eyes with him. “I tried to warn you, Gihun. But you still chose to run into that asshole’s arms.” He paused, his voice hardening. “So get up. Go to him.”

“Wow. You really know how to comfort him,” Sae-Byeok sneered, rolling her eyes as she dismissed Sangwoo’s glare, standing her ground with an unshakable calm.

“Look...” Sangwoo sighed, his voice softening as he turned back to Gihun. “I know you love him, hyung. God knows why, but you do.” He paused, studying Gihun closely. “So why don’t you want to do this? What’s holding you back?”

Gihun swallowed, his throat tight as he thought over the question. His gaze dropped to the floor, his voice faltering. “I... What if I disappoint him like I did in my first marriage? What if I’m not—”

“Dad, is that what you think happened?” Ga-Yeong asked softly, her hands still holding his, her grip steady and reassuring. Her eyes were filled with quiet sadness, and as Gi-hun met her stare, he

flinched. “You weren’t a disappointment—not to her... not to me. She just found the right person at the wrong time. But, Dad, you found the right person at the right time. And he loves you. He truly does and….you deserve to be happy”

At her words, Gi-hun felt a lump rise in his throat, and his eyes prickled with emotion. Without thinking, he reached forward and pinched his daughter’s cheeks, a nostalgic smile tugging at his lips. Ga-Yeong, with a playful glare, swatted his hand away. “Ahhhh….when did my little girl grow up so fast?” he asked, his voice soft with wonder and pride.

Ga-Yeong laughed, gently pulling her dad to his feet and looping her arms around his. “Come on, Dad. Let’s get you married before your daughter gets any older,” she teased, a playful glint in her eyes.

Sangwoo sighed softly, adjusting his suit as he rose, with Sae-Byeok, Junhee, and Ali following his lead. The four of them moved quietly behind Gi-hun and Ga-Yeong, their smiles barely visible as they walked toward the doors. When they stepped out onto the lawn, a hush fell over the crowd, every eye turning to watch. The sudden silence made Gi-hun straighten up, his nerves coming back but also tempered by a deep sense of anticipation.

His gaze immediately found the front, locking onto Inho, who stood at the aisle in his sleek black suit. As their eyes met, Inho’s expression softened, the affection in his eyes clear, and it sent a wave of warmth through Gihun. He couldn’t help but stare, as if he was seeing Inho for the first time all over again, the love he thought he had figured out suddenly feeling new, deeper, as though he was falling in love with him again.

Just as Gihun was about to move forward, a sharp tug on his sleeve pulled him back. He looked down, meeting Ga-Yeong's wide, beaming grin. Before he could even react, she spun around, motioning toward Sae-Byeok and Junhee with a mischievous glint in her eyes. The two women shared a look, then a smile—one that mirrored Ga-Yeong’s— appeared on their faces.In one smooth motion, they linked arms, with Sae-Byeok stepping in and securely looping her free arm through Gi-hun's.

"Now we can marry you off without worry," Ga-Yeong teased, giving his arm a light pat. Gi-hun felt his throat tighten, tears threatening to spill as he looked at Junhee and Sae-Byeok. Their expressions were filled with understanding, offering him quiet reassurance without saying a word.

As they gently nudged him forward, guiding him toward Inho, everything around him seemed to fade into the background. His heart raced, but it wasn’t out of fear anymore. There was a strange clarity in the air, a feeling of rightness that had been missing for so long.

With every step, Gihun felt like he was finally moving toward something he hadn’t been sure he’d ever deserve. And yet, as his gaze met Inho’s, it felt like the moment had been waiting for him all along.

“You look beautiful,” Inho said, his eyes warm as he held Gi-hun’s hand, his words wrapping around him like a gentle promise.

Sae-Byeok, Junhee, and Ga-Yeong stepped back, giving the couple the space they needed, their faces radiating quiet joy.

Gihun’s heart fluttered at Inho’s words as the priest began speaking, but the sound didn't register. His focus remained entirely on Inho, who never once broke their gaze.

“Do you take Hwang Inho as your lawfully wedded husband?” the priest asked, his voice steady.

Without a second thought, Gihun nodded, his hands gripping Inho’s tightly. “Yes. A thousand times yes.” His voice was thick with emotion, each word resonating with the depth of everything he felt for Inho, a commitment he had never known he was capable of making.

Before the priest could continue, Inho cut him off, his voice unwavering and full of certainty. “Yes.” The priest paused, taken aback, but Inho wasn’t bothered. Without hesitation, he pulled Gi-hun closer and pressed a kiss to his lips, sealing the promise in a single, perfect moment.

It was no longer about the words, the vows, or the ceremony. In that kiss, everything they had been through, everything they were, was laid bare—raw, undeniable, and eternal.

As they pulled away, their foreheads resting together, breath mingling, hearts beating in synchrony, Gihun couldn’t fathom how anything could top this feeling. This moment, this connection—it was perfect.

But he should have known better than to believe anything could stay perfect.

"Why the hell did you invite me here?" Thanos grumbled, shoveling cake into his mouth with such force that Gi-hun feared he might break a tooth on the fork. But then he slowed, as if considering something. "Yo, am I at a—"

Inho sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, but stayed close to Gi-hun, refusing to leave his side. "Yes, you are at a gay wedding," he said, voice dripping with exasperation. "We only invited you because... well, Gihun's daughter—" He paused, glancing at Gi-hun before his gaze softened, a tender look crossing his features. "Our daughter is a fan of yours."

Gihun gave a sheepish smile, while Thanos wore a smug, almost triumphant expression. When they first met at the gay bar, Gi-hun had assumed Thanos was joking about being a rapper. But then his daughter started gushing about him during their weekly calls—her eyes practically sparkling with excitement every time his name came up. That’s when Gi-hun learned that Thanos wasn’t just a casual performer. He was a full-blown star, already a household name among younger audiences.

As soon as Inho learned about Ga-Yeong’s obsession with the rapper, he sprang into action. Without hesitation, he tracked down Thanos, paid a small fortune to his manager, and somehow convinced him to make a special appearance at their wedding.

It was one thing to see Inho’s calm, collected side, but moments like this—when he was so determined to make their family’s happiness a reality—left Gihun in awe. Just recalling how Inho paced the floor, frantically working out every detail, made his heart swell with gratitude.

“Wait…” Inho’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Are you high?”

Thanos froze for a moment, then casually pulled out a silver cross from around his neck. “Only high on God’s love, man,” he said with a grin, showing off his rings and flashing them in exaggerated poses, like he was on stage.

Inho's jaw clenched, on the verge of responding, when someone else interrupted him.

“Uh, I think the stakeholders wanted me to give this to you?”Myung-Gi said awkwardly, dragging a large parchment behind him. He let it drop to the floor with a thud.

Inho's eyes shot to the item, a frown deepening on his face. "I told them I'm not working today."

"It's not work." Myung-Gi shook his head, nudging the parchment toward Inho with his foot. "Said it was a gift and insisted you open it right now."

"Great," Inho muttered, kneeling down to untie the ribbon, tearing the parchment away piece by piece... until…

The four men leaned in, eyes widening as they saw what was inside.

It was a 30 x 40-inch photograph, capturing the exact moment Gihun punched Inho's face in the office. The clarity was uncanny—Gihun's fist mid-swing, Inho's shocked expression, and the smug smiles of the stakeholders in the background, all perfectly preserved.

For a long beat, no one moved. Inho's eyes were fixed on the picture, and for a moment, the room was silent—too silent.

Then Inho looked up, a smile curling at the corners of his lips, though it was more menacing than reassuring. As he stood up, he brushed off any dirt that clung to his suit, his posture stiff with a tension that clearly said he wasn't amused.

"Well, at least they got my good side," Gihun said awkwardly, his eyes lingering on the picture. He almost admired the quality of the shot—it was so crisp and detailed—but what it captured made him cringe. The memory of that moment, of everything that had led up to it, was anything but flattering.

"Man, you guys are freaks," Thanos said, eyes widening as he took in the photo. He opened the cross in his hand, casually popping one of the pills inside, and Gihun couldn't help but stare, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

Guess... he meant it literally when he said he was high on God's love

"I need a drink," Inho muttered, kicking the photo aside with a sigh. His eyes narrowed at the stakeholders who had somehow weaseled their way into the wedding. A few feet away, they waved at him, drinks in hand, smirks playing on their lips as they reveled in their unwanted presence. He paused for a moment, then looked at Gihun, his expression softening as the tension drained from his face. "Want to get out of here?"

Gihun blinked, still processing the suggestion. "Are you asking to leave *our* own wedding?" he asked, a mix of disbelief and amusement in his voice.

Inho's smile only widened as he extended his hand toward Gihun, his fingers beckoning. Without a second thought, Gihun took it, and together, they dashed away, laughing like children. They raced past Junho's puzzled gaze, Sangwoo and Ali deep in quiet conversation near the food table, and Junhee and Ga-Yeong, who shared a knowing smile, their eyes gleaming with amusement.

And just like that, their wedding ended—ties loosened, drinks in hand, and carefree laughter filling the air as they played children's games in a familiar park, completely ignoring the flood of notifications from Sangwoo and Junho asking where they were. The scene was far from perfect, but it was *theirs* .

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your kind and supportive comments! I'll do my best to reply to each one, or at least to those on the last two chapters, but it might take me a little time <3

Extra: Corporate Babies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s time to get up, Gihun.”

Soft lips pressed against his cheeks , pulling him out of the haze of sleep. He groaned, instinctively trying to melt back into the softness of the sheets.

The other person chuckled softly, the sound warm with affection, as they moved closer, trapping him gently between their arms.Leaning in toward his right ear, they whispered in a low, sultry purr, “We could stay in bed *all day* , if that’s what you want.”

Ok. That got him up

Gihun's eyes shot open, and in a flash, he leapt up, throwing a pillow at his husband. The shorter man caught it easily, a wide grin spreading across his face as he laughed at the sight of Gihun’s flushed cheeks and scowl.

But before Gihun could fire off another retort, Inho’s mother appeared at the door, Ji-Ho cradled in her arms.The baby’s eyes found Inho, and his tiny hands reached out, desperate for his father’s attention in a way that made Gihun’s heart *melt.*

Inho, his face lighting up, leaned down and pressed his lips to Ji-Ho’s cheek before blowing a loud raspberry. The baby’s reaction was instant—his giggles rang through the room, a pure, unfiltered sound of joy.

“Come on, Ji-Ho, tell Papa to stay home instead of going to work. Daddy can take care of both of you just fine.” Inho smiled, taking Ji-Ho’s hand and waving it at Gihun. Gihun felt his lips curve into a smile as he stepped off the bed, the chill in the air making him shiver.

“You should listen to him,” Mrs. Hwang chuckled, pinching her son’s cheek as he winced, though the expression of amusement never left his face. “He may not be good at many things, but I’m sure he’ll keep his word and be good to you.”

Gihun shook his head, his expression soft as he leaned down to press a tender kiss to his baby’s cheek. He then turned to Inho, giving him a brief but affectionate kiss on the cheek as well.

“I can’t do that to myself. It just wouldn’t be right.” Gihun's voice was steady, almost a whisper, as he carefully adjusted Jiho’s gloves, making sure each tiny finger was perfectly covered. His fingers lingered for a moment, the softness of the fabric grounding him before he turned to Inho. A mischievous grin spread across his face.“And I’ve got to make sure my dear husband doesn’t go pretending to be a worker in front of someone else again”

Inho winced in pain at the memory, his expression tightening, while Mrs. Hwang fought to suppress a smile, clearly relishing the moment. Like Junho and Gihun, she hadn’t let it go, still finding ways to tease Inho about it—even now.

“You work for me anyway. Isn’t it better for you to stay home and be with Jiho?” Inho said, lifting the baby into his arms. Jiho, his tiny hand still in his mouth, grinned up at them with a toothy smile that was impossible to resist. Gihun reached out, taking Jiho from Inho’s arms, and gently bumped his nose against the baby’s. A soft laugh escaped him as Jiho giggled in return.

“I need to go to work,” Gihun said, his voice steady. “Like I told you, I just can’t bring myself to rely on you.” He shifted his gaze from Ji-Ho to Inho, his eyes locking with his. “Besides, I’m sure we’ll find a babysitter soon enough.”

They did not, in fact, find a babysitter *soon* .

Gihun let out a deep sigh, his hand carefully positioned between the edge of the table and the baby now strapped to his chest, trying to steady the little one as he awkwardly typed out the latest report. The task should have been simple—finding a babysitter—but what had seemed like an easy solution had dragged on for days. And all because of Inho's stubbornness. He would complain that the workers were too "inexperienced," "too tall," "too short," "too much," or "too little"—nothing was ever quite right for his precious baby.

At one point, Gihun nearly snapped. He wanted to smack Inho and tell him this wasn’t *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* —that he couldn’t keep rejecting every potential babysitter as “too this” or “too that” and stop chasing them away before they even set foot inside their home.

“You okay? You look exhausted,” Junhee remarked, eyeing the dark circles under Gihun’s eyes. She watched him carefully as he stood up, clearly exhausted, and made his way to hand in his report to Sangwoo. After a moment, Junhee stepped closer, her eyes softening as she held her hands out toward Jiho. “I can take him for a bit, if you need a break. I’m free now, and you look like you could use one.”

Gihun hesitated for a beat before nodding, a quiet sense of gratitude washing over him. He unclasped Jiho from his chest, lifting him carefully into Junhee’s waiting arms. As soon as Jiho settled against her, Junhee teased him, her face lighting up with delight as the baby cooed, his tiny hands reaching toward her.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Junhee raised an eyebrow, her fingers lightly tickling Jiho’s stomach as they walked toward Sangwoo’s table. “Doesn’t Inho make more than enough to hire a babysitter, at least?”

Gihun shook his head, placing the papers on Sangwoo’s desk as the taller man looked up, his eyebrows furrowing at the sight of Jiho in Junhee’s arms. “He wasn’t satisfied with anyone who applied,” Gihun continued, his voice tinged with frustration. “He scared one so badly they ran out crying…”

Junhee’s lips curled into a thin line, barely concealing the amusement in her eyes. “What do you know …” she said, her tone sharp with playful irony, “Who would’ve guessed that the guy who practically had to lie his way into a husband would be this stubborn? But hey, if you’re really struggling, I can give you my babysitter’s number. My daughter’s obsessed with her.”

Instinctively, Gihun nodded, the thought settling in his mind. If Inho knew Junhee approved of her, surely he’d be more willing to hire her, right? Right?

But just as Gihun was about to respond, a loud cough cut through their conversation, making both of them turn. Sangwoo was watching them, his gaze cool and unimpressed, eyebrows raised as if

he’d been waiting for them to notice.

Instead of backing away or shrinking under Sangwoo’s intense stare, Junhee’s grin grew even wider. She looked between him and Jiho, mischief sparkling in her eyes, before sliding up next to Sangwoo and squishing both his and Jiho’s cheeks together.

"Is it just me, or do they kind of look alike?"

Gihun blinked, caught off guard by the remark. He turned his gaze to Jiho, who, much to his surprise, had adopted the same frown as Sangwoo—a miniature mirror of the man standing beside him.

It was kinda funny.

However, Jiho clearly didn’t share the same sentiment. With an angry shriek, he reached up and grabbed a fistful of Sangwoo's hair, tugging hard enough to make him yelp in surprise. Tears streamed down Jiho's face as he clung to Sangwoo’s hair with surprising strength. Junhee was already there, desperately trying to pry the baby’s tiny hands away, but it wasn’t until Gihun rushed over that Jiho finally loosened his grip, still bawling, his tiny fists clenched in frustration.

Junhee stared at Sangwoo, who had his head lowered, rubbing the sore spot where Jiho had grabbed his hair. She couldn’t hold it in any longer—her cheeks puffed out as she let out a loud, uncontrollable laugh. “Like father, like son, I guess,” she teased, still chuckling.

Gihun could only grimace, holding Jiho close to his chest as the baby drifted off to sleep, blissfully unaware of the chaos he’d just caused. It was as if he hadn’t just nearly given Sangwoo a bald spot. But as more eyes turned toward him, Gihun hastily grabbed his lunch and coat, making a beeline for the rooftop before Sangwoo could confront them about what had just happened.

Inho was already on the roof, his smile widening as he saw them approach, gesturing for them to sit beside him. As Gihun sat down, he quickly turned to Inho, his tone urgent as he blurted out,

"We need a babysitter."

The shorter man’s expression shifted, a hint of concern flickering in his eyes as he carefully cradled Jiho in his arms. His fingers moved with practiced ease, pulling out the bottle to feed the baby. He looked up at Gihun, his voice quiet but resolute. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t rush into this and find a babysitter at our own pace”

Gihun let out a soft sigh, resting his forehead against the cool rooftop railing. "I know, Inho, but we can't keep bringing him to the office every day. It’s not good for him.Did you see what happened with Sangwoo? Jiho grabbed his hair—almost pulled-”

He paused, glancing over at Inho with a hint of disbelief. “Are you smiling?”

“N-No?”Inho coughed, his attempt to hide the smile failing miserably, and instead, a crooked grimace twisted his face.

“I’m serious, Inho.” Gihun crossed his arms, a playful smile tugging at his lips as he watched Jiho burp loudly in response. “I know you’re worried about leaving him with someone you don’t trust, but…”

Inho gently rubbed Jiho's back, his gaze clouded with concern as he turned to face Gihun. "I know you're right. I really do. It's just… I can't shake this feeling that if we're not there, something could go wrong. What if something happens and we're not there to protect him?"

At those words, the taller man leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Inho's cheek, his voice soft but reassuring. "I know. But we'll be there every step of the way, whether it's at the office or at home. We'll make sure he's okay, no matter what. You're not doing this alone, Inho."

He pulled back slightly, meeting Inho's gaze with a steady look, hoping to calm the worry that was so clearly etched on his face. "We'll figure this out, together."

"How did you become the voice of reason?" Inho chuckled, shaking his head as he carefully settled Jiho on his lap. His fingers gently brushed through the baby's hair.

"Alright, fine," he sighed, his grin widening. "We'll do it. But only a test run for now. Junho's on his break next week, so I'll have him take care of Jiho. Let's see how it goes."

Inho locked eyes with Gihun, a mischievous glint flashing in his gaze. "But if he survives Junho... maybe we'll consider it."

Gihun nodded, a grin spreading across his face, the taste of victory already lingering in his mind.

However, Junho didn't exactly rise to the occasion.

Both men stood frozen, disbelief painting their faces as they took in the sight before them: Junho, absurdly outfitted with a pot on his head and bubble wrap encircling his body, cradling Jiho in his arms. The baby, completely oblivious, cooed and gurgled happily. Junho blinked in surprise, his gaze shifting between the door and the two men.

"You're home early…" he mumbled, his voice laced with confusion and a touch of embarrassment.

Gihun stood there, completely stunned, his mouth opening and closing as if searching for the right words.

"What—" He swallowed hard, finally managing to gather himself before pulling Jiho into his arms. "What happened?"

Junho hesitated, glancing over his shoulder before turning back to face them. "Uh... well, he kinda threw up on my shirt," he started, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "I didn't have an extra one, and, uh, I was preparing for round two, so I figured the bubble wrap might help protect me." His voice trailed off, as if he, too, was realizing just how ridiculous it all sounded.

"That doesn't explain the pot on your head." Inho's gaze fixed on the absurd item, his expression a mix of disbelief and mild irritation. He stared at his brother, raising an eyebrow. "What exactly was the plan there, Junho?"

"Well, I kinda… lost track of him for a second," Junho said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his hands awkwardly fumbling with the bubble wrap. "Next thing I know, he's on top of the cupboards, throwing stuff at my head. I tried to bribe him with some beer, but he wasn't having it.With those climbing skills, you should really consider getting him to sign up for the marines in-"

Gihun's eyes snapped wide, interrupting Junho's rambling. "You tried to give him *beer* ??"

Junho blinked, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his tone. “What was I supposed to do? He was curious about it a few minutes ago! It was right there, and I thought—well, I thought it couldn’t hurt for him to try it…” He stopped, finally catching the horrified expression on Gihun’s face. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t the best call, but—”

“I don’t get babies, okay?!” Junho threw his hands up in exasperation, the bubble wrap crinkling loudly as he gestured wildly. “They’re like tiny humans, but they’re not, and they do stuff that makes no sense! One minute he’s looking at the beer like it’s the greatest thing in the world, and the next minute he’s throwing things off the counter! How am I supposed to handle that?”

Inho let out a long sigh, his gaze fixed on Gihun, and Gihun could already sense the question forming in his eyes.

“Fine,” Gihun groaned, his voice heavy with resignation. “I’ll stay home with Jiho until we find a suitable babysitter.”

And with that, both Inho and—somehow—Jiho grinned, as if their child understood exactly what was said.

Gihun couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight. It was uncanny—like father, like son. Both Inho and Jiho, grinning up at him with the same spark in their eyes, as if they were in on some private joke that only they understood.

After a minute , Gihun shook his head, amusement clear in his face. “They’ve got me wrapped around their fingers already,” Gihun muttered, a soft laugh escaping him. And honestly? He couldn’t bring himself to mind.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading! As we reach the end...

I just wanted to share my latest fic—it's a Guardian Angel AU! Here's the link:

https://archiveofourown.org/works/62677153/chapters/160451056

Hope you enjoy this AU as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!